

Original Research Article

A cross sectional study to assess the discrimination faced by trans genders in health care facilities- Chennai, Tamil Nadu

Chitra A., Sakthimarieswari G. M.*, Kaleeswaran S., Indhira V. R.,
Mythili Menon Pathiyil, Shreyavarshini

Institute of Community Medicine, Madras Medical College, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

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*Correspondence:

Dr. Sakthimarieswari G. M.,

E-mail: sakthimarieswari@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: Transgender people are those who by definition, have a gender identity or gender expression that differs from their assigned sex at birth. The Government of Tamil Nadu was the first Indian state to pioneer welfare schemes for transgenders such as formation of transgender welfare board, creation of a third column for gender in college application forms. The study aims to assess the discrimination faced by the transgenders in health care facilities.

Methods: A cross sectional study was carried out among 50 transgenders using a self-administered questionnaire.

Results: Among 47 respondents, 17.6% of the transgenders had delayed going to hospital fearing discrimination. Harassment either in physical or verbal form experienced by 41.2% and 37.5% faced discrimination in form of judgemental looks or comments, while 5.9% of the transgenders were denied treatment altogether in the hospital. Denial of equal treatment experienced by 52.9% of the study participants.

Conclusions: The study highlights that transgenders even today face considerable discrimination which refrains them from accessing health care facilities. Even though we in Tamil Nadu have pioneered with the formation of transgender board, free sex re-assignment surgery in government health care facilities, the utilisation by the transgenders are far from behind. This may be attributed due to the discrimination faced by the transgenders.

Keywords: Transgenders, Discrimination, Health care facilities.

INTRODUCTION

Transgender people are those who by definition, have a gender identity or gender expression that differs from their assigned sex at birth.^{1,2} The term Gender nonconforming refers to those individuals whose external manifestation of gender identity does not conform to society's expectation of gender roles.² As per 2011 census, out of the total estimated population of 1.247billion, people who have identified themselves as transgenders constitute 4,87,803, with the population in Tamil Nadu being 22364.³

Even though they exist from time immemorial, with evidence available in Bible, Quran, ancient sangam tamil literature, they lack attention, love and concern from their fellow human beings. Transgenders believed to have a glorified past in the ancient times where people believed them to have been vested with mysterious powers. During the Mughal period they were the guardians of royal harems and have held influential posts.

The fall of the transgenders came with the British colonial rule after the coding and implementation of "criminal tribes act 1871" categorised the entire

transgender community as criminals and punished them severely at every possible moment.⁴

Tamil Nadu, a culturally conservative state in southern India, is a pioneer in the field of reforms for Transgender community. The state developed a 'Transgender welfare board' in April 2008, the first of its kind in India, perhaps the entire world. The board functions under the Ministry of Social Welfare with the vision of providing free housing, transit homes, shelter homes, ration cards, educational scholarship, self-help groups, income generation activities, sex reassignment surgeries. Tamil Nadu is again the first state in India to provide sex reassignment surgery free of cost at government hospitals namely the Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital and Kilpauk Medical College since 2010.⁵

The state of Tamil Nadu, celebrates the 15th of April every year as the "Thirunangai Day", commemorating the launching of the 'Transgender welfare Board'.⁵

Even before the landmark judgement by Supreme Court of India on Transgenders in April 2014 "recognising them as Third gender who can avail the services entitled to OBC reservation", the government of Tamil Nadu in May 2008 created a third gender column for the transgenders breaking the binary gender stereotype form.^{6,7}

Even with so many advances and reforms, the current plight of transgenders is far from being satisfactory. The social integration of transgenders with the mainstream community is practically non-existent even today. It is not uncommon in everyday scenario where one usually encounters transgenders begging in the metro trains, local trains, bus stands and terminuses for their livelihood. This is because they are isolated and are being pushed into begging and prostitution, of which the latter makes them prone for STDs and HIVs. As per WHO report on transgenders," the transgender females are 49 times more likely to be living with HIV than other adults of reproductive age with an estimated worldwide HIV prevalence of 19%".⁸

Objective

To assess the discrimination faced by transgenders in the health care facilities.

METHODS

Study design: Cross sectional study

Study place: Chennai

Study period: September 2016 to November 2016

Selection criteria and procedure

The study participants comprised of 50 transgenders selected by simple random sampling from the list

provided by a non-governmental organisation based at Chennai.

Inclusion criteria

Transgenders enlisted with the NGO for a period of more than one year and willing to participate in the study.

Exclusion criteria

Transgenders who did not give informed consent to participate in the study.

Ethical approval

Obtained permission to conduct the study from Institutional Ethics Committee, Madras Medical College. Informed consent obtained from the participants.

Study tool

A semi structured self-administered questionnaire in local language was used to collect information about discrimination faced by the transgenders in health care facilities.

Statistical analysis

Data collected was entered in MS Excel and analysed using SPSS16. Appropriate descriptive statistical tests used.

RESULTS

Of the 50 transgenders who were provided with the questionnaires, 3 of them were not taken up for analysis as they were incomplete.

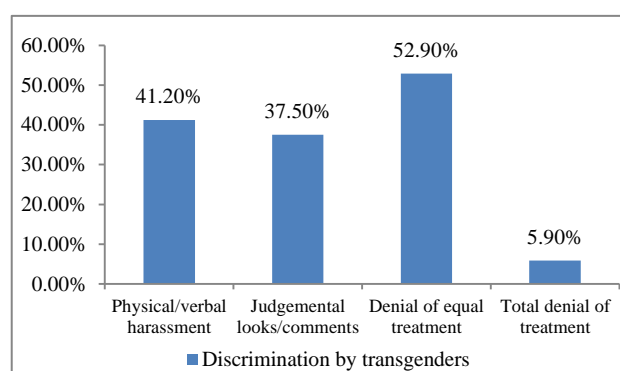


Figure 1: Discrimination faced by the transgenders.

Out of the 47 respondents, 5.9% of them do not go to a hospital for illness and of the remaining, 57.1% preferred government setup to private setup. In the present study, 17.6% of the transgenders had delayed going to hospital for seeking health care fearing discrimination. About 17.6% of them withheld information about their gender identity to the health care providers. Among the

respondents, 41.2% have faced harassment either in physical or verbal form in health care facilities and 37.5% faced discrimination in form of judgemental looks or comments, while 5.9% of the Transgenders were denied treatment altogether in the hospital (Figure 1).

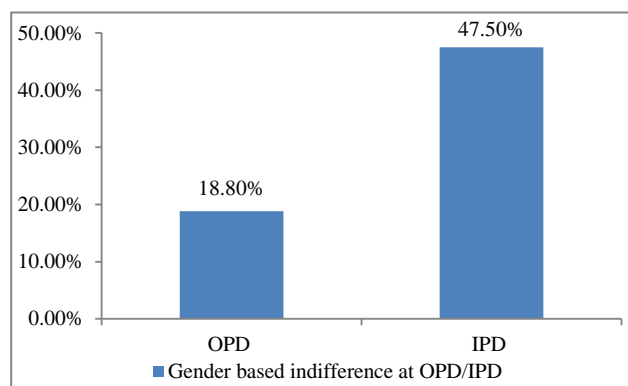


Figure 2: Gender based indifference faced by the transgenders at outpatient (OPD) and inpatient (IPD) departments.

About 52.9% of the transgenders in our study feel that they were denied equal treatment in hospitals. The preference to be treated either by male or female doctor have been ignored to 37.5% of the transgenders. About 43.8% of the male to female transgenders responded that their physical examination was not always done in presence of another female and 41.2% of them felt that they were not treated with the same discretion as other female patients. Forced admission to gender based outpatient department (OPD), inpatient ward admission (IPD) was seen in 18.8% and 47.5% of the transgenders respectively (Figure 2).

Around 52.9% of them reported that their health care provider bring up their sexual activity even to treat seemingly unrelated illness. The sex workers among our study population regularly checking their HIV status and attending STD clinic was 58.9%, while 35.3% of them do so once in 6 months. During the transition phase, 58.8% of the study people were not taken to a hospital or clinic and 29.4% of the total study participants have not yet undergone any form of counselling or hormone therapy or sex reassignment surgery in the hospital. The overall experience in the hospitals was rated as unpleasant by 31.3% of the transgenders.

DISCUSSION

Even with the establishment of Transgender welfare board, transgenders are still facing discrimination in their day to day life. In our study 57.1% of the transgenders attended public health facility, when compared with a similar study conducted by Lambda legal health care in 2009, where only a meagre 10.9% attended public clinic facility in USA.² This difference may be attributed to the fact that in Indian government health facility, health care

is available free of cost whereas the private is costly without an insurance. In a study conducted among Mumbai Transgenders by A.Gupta et al, only 1.5% of the transgenders accessed public health facility, whereas majority of the Mumbai transgenders preferred taking drugs from pharmacy⁹. The difference noted in our study and Mumbai study may also be due to the fact that in Tamil Nadu government health facility from outpatient tickets to consultation and drugs, dressings, injections are provided free of cost.

In our study 17.6% of the transgenders have delayed going to health care facilities fearing discrimination. National transgender discrimination survey report on health and health care conducted by J. Grant et al says in October 2010, 28% of the transgenders postponed care due to discrimination from medical providers.¹⁰ 17.6% of the transgenders have withheld information regarding their gender identity to the medical providers having prior bitter experience. Even though the government of Tamil Nadu recognised them as third gender, which was later followed by the supreme court of India, the transgenders till today to a certain extent are forced to withhold their gender identity fearing discrimination. Freedom of expression of identity is lost, which is a serious matter.

5.9% of our study population were denied treatment altogether in the hospital. In the Lambda legal health survey, 27% of them were refused needed care.² In our study, 41.2% have faced harassment either in physical or verbal form in health care facilities. 37.5% faced discrimination in form of judgemental looks or comment from other patients in the healthcare facility. In the study by J. Grant et al, 28% of the transgenders reported verbal harassment in doctor's office¹⁰ and in Lambda Legal health care survey 21% of the transgenders faced harsh or abusive language by Health Care Providers (HCP), 8% experienced physical or abusive treatments by providers.² Even though the harassment faced by the transgenders in our study is high when compared with the other studies, the overall proportion of transgenders who were denied treatment is very much low when compared. The reason for denial may be due to the fact that healthcare providers may not be well versed with the knowledge on treatment of transgenders, ethical considerations regarding treatment, as it is not a sub speciality even today.

52.9% of the transgenders in our study felt they were denied equal treatment in hospitals. In the Lambda Legal health care study also, 51% believed that they were treated indifferently by their health care providers that other patients.² Such similar results, reflects their core feeling of struggle to mingle with general population.

Transgenders are unique in a way that those who have transitioned from male to female show extreme form of feminism and take pride in expressing and feeling like a female. In all the ways, they expect the society to treat them as female. Similar holds true for female to male

transition. This need is not understood by many and they are forced against their wishes into male or female wards/Outpatient departments (OPD) against their preferences. In our study, around 47.5% of the transgenders have been forced into male or female ward against their preferences, and 18.8% were forced into gender based OPD against their preference. 37.5% have been denied their preferences to be examined by a male or female doctor as per their wish. This may also be attributed to the non-availability of separate in patient wards for the transgenders. In most of the health facilities separate toilet facilities for the transgenders are also not available, which might also be the reason for the higher rate of denial regarding inpatient ward preferences.

It is mandatory as per medical ethics to examine a female patient in the presence of another female who can either be an attender, relative or hospital staff. This also violated in case of 43.8% of the male to female transgenders in our study. 41.2% of the transgenders felt that they were not treated with the same discretion as other female patients.

In a study conducted by Collier in Argentina among transgender women titled "Addressing transgender discrimination in health", Nicole Nussbaum past president of Canadian Professional Association for transgender health has strongly condemns that probing transgenders about their sexual activity unrelated to their current presenting illness is also a form of discrimination.¹¹ In our study around 52.9% of the transgender have reported this form of discrimination. This may be due to fact as already mentioned above due to restraints regarding knowledge and over enthusiasm to treat transgender patients.

CONCLUSION

From the present study it is evident that still today transgenders face significant discrimination in health care facilities. Even though we in Tamil Nadu have pioneered with the formation of transgender board, free sex re-assignment surgery in government health care facilities, the utilisation by the transgenders are far from behind. This may be attributed due to the discrimination faced by the transgenders.

Recommendations

- A separate sub speciality /specific periodic training regarding transgender care to be given to health care providers
- Separate in patient wards may be dedicated to transgenders in health care facilities.
- Sensitisation of health care staffs like staff nurse, ward staffs may be attempted with the help of NGOs
- The transgender welfare board must function optimally.

Further explorative and qualitative studies are needed to bring out the large hidden discrimination faced by transgenders and for framing appropriate welfare measures.

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