



The Unseen Battle

A Situation Analysis on Transgender Male Community
Living in Sri Lanka

Équité Sri Lanka



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Contents

Executive Summary 4

Terminologies 5

Methodology 6

Identity of a transgender male..... 7

The crisis of finding their identity 8

Impact of the hegemonic masculinity 9

Living with the transgender identity11

Legal and Policy Landscape13

Discrimination and Stigma16

It all starts from the “Family”17

Living among the negative gaze.....18

Impacts of Religion20

Education setting22

Employment.....24

Access to Healthcare services26

Recommendations.....29

Executive Summary

In recent years, the global conversation surrounding transgender rights and inclusivity has gained significant momentum, shedding light on the unique challenges faced by transgender individuals in various parts of the world. The rights movement of the transgender male community in Sri Lanka also made significant strides in recent years in terms of legal recognition and acceptance. However, challenges persist, and are multifaceted, encompassing social, legal, healthcare, and economic aspects of their lives.

Within the world wide rights movement of the transgender community, it is seen that the visibility and the representation of transgender male community is comparatively lower to the transgender female community. Sri Lanka is not immune to this phenomenon. It is seen that the transgender male community shows reluctance in identifying themselves as “Transgender male”. This also reflects on their participation in the common platforms created for the LGBTIQ+ community in Sri Lanka. This has immensely contributed in creating a void of the transgender male community within the LGBTIQ+ movement in Sri Lanka.

The transgender men also faces a multitude of unique issues and challenges that are deeply rooted in the country's cultural, societal, and legal framework. There is a pervasive lack of awareness and understanding about issues related to transgender male community, leading to widespread discrimination and stigmatization. Even though there are significant progressions in adopting inclusive policies on transgender community within legal, health care, education and other sectors in Sri Lanka, discrimination against these individuals are still prevalent. For a transgender male, access to healthcare is a significant challenge, as they often encounter resistance from medical professionals who are ill-equipped to provide appropriate care. Moreover, legal recognition and protection for transgender rights remain inadequate, with no clear legal framework for gender identity recognition or anti-discrimination laws in place. This leaves transgender men vulnerable to various forms of abuse and exclusion, both within their families and in broader society. Additionally, employment discrimination and limited educational opportunities further hinder their socio-economic prospects.

Addressing these unique challenges requires concerted efforts to raise awareness, reform healthcare systems, and enact comprehensive legal protections to ensure the transgender male community in Sri Lanka can lead fulfilling lives free from discrimination and prejudice.

Terminologies

Binders: is a tight-fitting piece of clothing used in wrapping around your chest to flatten your breasts

GRC: Gender Recognition Certificate.

Gender Affirmation Surgeries: Also known as Gender Confirmation Surgery, Sex Reassignment Surgery is a set of surgical procedures that help alter a transgender person's physical attributes, especially their sexual and reproductive organs, to match the gender with which they identify.

Heterosexual: A person who is sexually, romantically or emotionally attracted to people of the opposite sex.

ILO: International Labour Organization

LGBTIQ+: is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning and other

NIC: National Identity Card

Transgender: A person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex.

Transgender Male: A person who was assigned female at birth but whose gender identity is male

Transphobia: Fear, displeasure and hate towards transgender persons due to the lack of awareness and knowledge

Top surgery: Also called as the breast removal surgery which involves the removal of breast tissue or contouring of the tissue.

SOGIESC: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics

UPR: Universal Periodic Review

Methodology

The following methodology is used in compiling the report.

Data Collection: All the participants in the study identified themselves as transgender male persons. Data collection was done using two modes; Conducting a survey and focus group discussions with the participation of 169 Transgender male community members across the country. The survey was conducted island-wide and had 144 responses. Five focus group discussions were carried out with 25 participants from Central Province, Eastern Province, Northern Province, North Western Province, North Central Province, Southern Province, Sabaragamuwa Province and Western Province. The participants obtained an agreement on consent in sharing data within the report. The cases and the statements incorporated within the report have used a pseudonym to ensure the confidentiality of the identity of the participants.

Parameters: As this is a pilot study on analyzing the situation of transgender male community, it mainly focused on understanding the unique issues and challenges faced by the transgender male community in Sri Lanka. The questionnaires for both survey and focus group discussions were developed to understand the political, socio- economic conditions of the transgender male community. As this is a pilot project, the questionnaires did not have limitations in the time period of the experiences shared by the participants.

Presentation: The report is compiled as a case-based narrative. The abbreviations used within the report are listed under the abbreviations in the table of content.

Identity of a transgender male

Identity is a fundamental aspect of human existence, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and interact with the world around them. The identity of a transgender individual in Sri Lanka, like in many parts of the world, is a complex and multifaceted journey that is shaped by a variety of cultural, social, and personal factors. For a transgender male in Sri Lanka, the process of self-discovery and acceptance often involves navigating a society that may not fully comprehend or accept their identity. They face discrimination and stigma, both from their families and communities, which result in isolation and psychological distress. The journey to self-acceptance can be particularly challenging in Sri Lanka where traditional gender norms are deeply entrenched in the society.

The crisis of finding their identity

“It honestly took me so much time to discover my identity. I first thought I was a lesbian as I have always liked girls. But it took me a long time to understand that I identify myself as a man. Because in our society dressing up in mens attire is not looked down upon as much as a man wearing women's clothes. I also didn't know there were transgender men in Sri Lanka. I have seen transgender women but it took me a long time to find my community and reach out to them.”

- *Sudheera, Age 35 from Rajagiriya*

A transgender male's biological body plays a complex and integral role in shaping their identity. From the moment they become aware of their gender identity, often at a young age, they grapple with the incongruence between their internal sense of self and their physical attributes assigned at birth. This incongruence leads to profound feelings of dysphoria, a deep discomfort or distress with their own body. As a result, transgender males often embark on a deeply personal journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance that is inextricably tied to their biological body.

“I know it is not good to wear a binder all the time. But I simply cannot help it. I hate my body, especially my upper body. The pain I get from wearing binders also makes me hate my body more. Sometimes even the body of my partner makes me angry at my own body parts.”

- *Vivek, Age 29 from Kelaniya*

As stated by the participants, the physical characteristics typically associated with female biology, such as breasts and a more feminine physique, can trigger dysphoria and feelings of alienation. These feelings lead to a disconnect from one's own body and may contribute to mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety.

Also it was said by the participants that the society's perception of a transgender male's biological body has a significant impact on their identity. It mainly contributes in creating consistent necessity within the transgender male community to fit into the stereotypical gender roles established in the society.

Impact of the hegemonic masculinity

Toxic masculinity is a set of cultural norms and expectations that reinforce traditional male stereotypes, often promoting harmful behaviors and attitudes. The concept is rooted in traditional gender roles, which prescribe specific behaviors, emotions, and characteristics for men. These norms often include an emphasis on stoicism, emotional suppression, dominance, and aggression, while discouraging vulnerability, empathy, and the expression of emotions other than anger. It is a phenomenon that has garnered significant attention in recent years, sparking discussions about its impact on individuals and society as a whole.

When considering the transgender male community, it becomes clear that toxic masculinity tendencies can intersect with the experiences of transgender men in unique ways. As the experiences of the transgender male are shaped by the interplay of gender identity and societal expectations, it also could include toxic masculinity tendencies.

“I have completed my transitioning process. I am married too. But still I feel insecure about my appearance. It still gives me a shock down my spine sometimes when I stand in front of the mirror. I don't think it will ever go away.”

- *Vihanga, Age 32 from Galle*

Participants in the study stated that transgender men experience body dysphoria, which is the distress associated with the incongruence between their gender identity and their physical appearance. This distress, exacerbated by societal expectations of traditional masculinity, makes it challenging for transgender men to navigate their self-image and self-esteem.

Discussions with the participants brought forward the perception that the society often expects transgender men to "pass" as cisgender men, meaning they should appear and behave in ways that conform to traditional male stereotypes. This pressure leads to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety, as transgender men may fear judgment or discrimination if they do not meet these expectations.

Toxic masculinity tendencies discourage the open expression of emotions other than anger. Within the discussions of the participants it is observed that the transgender men suppress emotions like sadness, fear, and vulnerability to fit into the perceived mold of masculinity. They fear that expressing these emotions would make them appear less masculine or undermine their identity. This suppression of emotions has severe consequences for their mental and emotional well-being.

Transgender men are also consistently in a battle with the intersection of their transgender identity and their experience as men. This intersection can involve unique challenges, such as access to healthcare, navigating relationships, and finding acceptance within both the transgender and cisgender communities.

Living with the transgender identity

Participants in the study were polarized under the discussion of how comfortable they are in identifying themselves as transgender male. 83% of the participants in the study stated that they see their life before transitioning as a completely different life to the life they are living now. Within the study it is highlighted that they abandon their past life and treat any lingering connections as relics which do not defy them. However, as they are unable to carry out their gender affirmation surgeries, transgender men face challenges in carrying out their day today activities.

One of the most immediate challenges transgender males face is the limited access to safe and inclusive restrooms. Public restrooms are typically designed with a binary gender system in mind, making it difficult for transgender individuals to find a comfortable and safe space to use the facilities. This leads to feelings of discomfort, anxiety, and even the avoidance of using public restrooms altogether.

“Once I suddenly got my periods at my work place and honestly I didn’t know what to do and how to use the washroom. There aren’t any facilities for me to dispose of sanitary napkins. I felt helpless.”

- *Nuwan, Age 27 from Kurunegala*

Inadequate access to sanitary facilities can have significant health implications. Transgender males may not have access to proper facilities for hygiene needs, especially during menstruation which can increase the risk of infections and other health issues.

Building and maintaining healthy relationships was discussed to be challenging for transgender males, as they often find themselves navigating complex dynamics with partners who may need time to understand and adjust to their transition. This challenge arises due to various factors, including societal norms, personal beliefs, and the unique experiences that both the transgender individual and their partner bring into the relationship.

Within the study it was highlighted that the transgender males often struggle with the challenging decision of when and how to reveal their gender identity to a potential romantic partner and their family members. The participants stated that this process is emotionally complex, as they navigate the intricate intersection of self-identity and societal expectations. The fear of rejection looms large in their minds, stemming from the all-too-real experiences of discrimination and prejudice that transgender individuals still face. This fear can manifest as anxiety, hesitation, and even a sense of vulnerability. It's not just the prospect of rejection

that weighs on their hearts, but also the possibility of being misunderstood. Many people may lack awareness or understanding of transgender issues, leading to misconceptions and uninformed reactions. Due to this some participants stated that they see a Lesbian person as a more potential partner to engage in a romantic relationship. However the participants stated that this attitude of the transgender community members lead them to have a toxic relationship.

Legal and Policy Landscape

The legal and policy landscape for transgender persons in Sri Lanka has seen significant changes and developments in recent years. The advocacy work within the Legal and Policy Landscape has never orchestrated particularly on transgender male community, however has had a common approach on all the individuals who identify themselves under the transgender umbrella. While the country has made strides in recognizing and protecting the rights of transgender individuals, there remain substantial challenges.

Gender identity and other acronyms related to SOGIESC are yet to be recognized under the constitution of Sri Lanka¹. The UPR recommendations received by Sri Lanka on the 4th UPR cycle contained the international recommendations pushing the state to take necessary actions in recognizing gender under the constitution and the Equality bill proposed by the Women Parliamentarians Caucus has included the mentioned amendment in their draft².

Transgender community could change their official documents; Birth Certificate, NIC, Driver's Licence, Passport, some educational certificates such as G.C.E Advanced Level, G.C.E. Ordinary Level within Sri Lanka under the Circular No 01-34/2016³. However the stakeholders and the service providers within the process; both in government and private sectors show a lack of awareness on the transitioning process. Due to this the transgender men face discrimination in changing their documents.

"I went to the Aththanagalla Divisional Secretariat to change my Birth Certificate. The officer whom I met did not have any idea on the documentation process and was asking me to fill out unnecessary documents. I had to get assistance from an organization to talk to the officers and convince them to proceed with my request to change the birth certificate."

- *Tharindu, Age 22 from Aththanagalla*

Participants in the study stated that the probability of transgender men subjected to arbitrary arrests based on their gender identities by the Police is minimum. However the participants in the focus group discussions stated that the discriminatory laws prevailing for LGBTIQ+ individuals do impact

¹ Under chapter III, article 12(2) The non discriminatory ground for the Right to Equality is mentioned as "No citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any one of such grounds:"

² GENDER EQUALITY ACT, NO. OF 2023: WORKING DRAFT
<http://www.childwomenmin.gov.lk/storage/app/media/Gender%20Equality%20Act%20%20Draft.pdf>

³ Issuing of Gender Recognition Certificate for Transgender Community,
<http://www.health.gov.lk/CMS/cmsmoh1/viewcircular.php?cno=01-34/2016&med=english>

as these laws have a direct effect on rooting a negative perception on the LGBTIQ+ community among the general masses.

“People think transitioning is something illegal in this country. Even my family members think the same. Even Though I tried hard to explain to them that it is not illegal and that there is a circular, they are not ready to understand nor listen to it.”

- *Lakmal, Age 25 from Galle*

Participants stated that these legal barriers directly impact them in marriage. A transgender male who has changed their legal documentations; NIC and Birth Certificate has the legal space to register a heterosexual marriage. However, it is often seen that upon the submission of the documents, especially the birth certificate, Marriage Registrar Officers reject these requests of the transgender male community. This reflects the lack of awareness among the officers as well as how their perceptions hinders them to provide services to the transgender male community.

“I was publicly shamed at the marriage registrar office. Both our families are conservative therefore we went to register our marriages without family members. We had our friends sign as witnesses and when the marriage registrar got to know about my identity she shouted at all of us. She even blamed our friends. There were many people at her office at that time and all of us were publicly humiliated.”

- *Pasan, Age 25 from Colombo*

Penal code sections 365⁴ and 365A⁵ which criminalizes same sex sexual conduct in Sri Lanka also impacts the transgender male community who identify their sexual orientation as same sex. As there is a misconception that all transgender persons are heterosexual, the legal challenges faced by same sex transgender men go unnoticed.

The common legal provision for rape in Sri Lanka only recognise virginal penetration by a penis. Hence the individuals who identify as male are not recognized under the common rape law and the sexual harassment against men are penalised under the grave sexual abuse. As majority of the

⁴ Section 365: Unnatural Offenses: Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman, or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.

⁵ Section 365A: Acts of gross indecency between persons: Any person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of an offense, and shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years or with fine, or with both, and shall also be liable to be punished with whipping.

transgender men do not undergo gender affirmation surgeries due to various reasons such as economic conditions, lack of medical professional expertise in the surgical procedures, stigma and discrimination, this legal provision leaves the transgender male community in Sri Lanka in a vulnerable position.

Another legal complication arises at the time of giving birth by a transgender male person in Sri Lanka. Transgender male who keep the uterus and ovaries have the possibility of becoming pregnant and giving birth. In Sri Lanka, there is no legal framework to facilitate such an incident. In issuing the birth certificate of the child, the transgender male faces many complications during the documentation process; whether to identify as the mother or the father of the child.

Discrimination and Stigma

The transgender male community continues to grapple with profound stigma and discrimination, which persist as significant barriers to their full inclusion and acceptance in society. Often subjected to the harsh effects of transphobia, transgender men face a relentless battle against prejudice, misconceptions, and bias. They are frequently invalidated and marginalized, with their identities and experiences dismissed or misunderstood. Discrimination can manifest in various forms, from social ostracization to employment disparities, healthcare inequalities, and even violence. These injustices have a devastating impact on the mental and emotional well-being of transgender men, exacerbating feelings of isolation and vulnerability.

It all starts from the “Family”

Family is one of the main social institutes in Sri Lanka. As many of the LGBTIQ+ community members, transgender men also first experience stigma and discrimination within their families. Discrimination against transgender men within their families can manifest in various ways, all of which are deeply hurtful and damaging to the individual's well-being.

“I have tried to explain my gender identity to my family members a million times. I’m not sure whether they don’t understand it or they are not ready to listen. I love them so much. But I cannot be with them and be true to myself too. I’m currently living separately because of this. I wish they would understand me and I could visit home sometimes.”

- *Pramod, Age 30 from Kandy*

Within the family, the stigma attached to transgender male identity often arises from a lack of understanding, fear, and adherence to traditional gender norms. Many families struggle to accept the fact that their loved one identifies as a different gender. As stated by the participants this resistance leads to feelings of rejection and isolation.

“I’m no longer living with my family. I’m actually scared of them. I’m living in hiding. My family, especially my mother doesn’t accept me at all”

- *Sahan, Age 37 from Kandy*

The participants in the study stated that the family members of the transgender men do not fully comprehend what it means to be transgender. As stated by the participants, they hold misconceptions, such as believing it is a phase or a choice. This lack of understanding has also resulted in insensitivity and rejection.

“My mother said that she is going to commit suicide if I go in to the transitioning process. I honestly didn’t know what to do at that time. She pressured me so much. Made me feel bad all the time. I never felt happy with myself. I still carry those traumas with me.”

- *Pasindu, Age 26 from Dehiwala*

61% of the transgender men who participated in the study stated that their immediate family members, especially their mother has tried guilt-tripping them which has contributed to serious emotional and psychological consequences. Participants stated that the lack of support and love from their family members has inflicted self doubt in transgender male community. It's essential for their families to understand that being transgender is not a choice; it's an intrinsic part of a person's identity and regardless of their gender identity they deserve love, acceptance, and support, especially from their families.

Living among the negative gaze

Transphobia is a pervasive and harmful prejudice that affects transgender individuals across the gender spectrum. Transgender men, in particular, face unique challenges and discrimination due to societal misconceptions and biases. It manifests in various forms, including verbal abuse, physical violence, exclusion, and microaggressions. Transphobia is rooted in ignorance, fear, and societal norms that reinforce the gender binary, where individuals are expected to conform to the sex assigned at birth. Transgender men, who were assigned female at birth but identify as men, often experience transphobia when their gender identity does not align with societal expectations.

92% of the participants in the study stated that they have to hide their identity in fear of societal perceptions towards transgender men.

“The biggest issue is the society and the way they look at us. They see us as some alien creature who does not belong in the society. We are never treated as normal and that is where the biggest issue is.”

- *Rashmika, Age 22 from Kegalle*

Participants in the study stated that it is difficult for them to live in their hometowns, especially if they are not living in urban areas. According to the participants in the study, the community surrounding the area would often make negative remarks which will result in the transgender men to distance themselves from the community living in the area or migrate where his identity is not known.

“I’m living in a village. Actually you have to go further into the village to find my house. I find it very hard to live there. I have even got death threats from the other young men in our village. I truly live with fear. I most of the time avoid walking alone, especially during nights.”

- *Lashan, Age 23 from Kandy*

These discrimination often stems from myths and misconceptions about transgender people and their experiences. Participants in the study stated that the majority of the society are not aware of the transgender identity and understand it as a phase of confusion faced by an individual. This belief undermines the experiences of transgender people and dismisses the very real and valid feelings they have about their gender. This lack of awareness leads to negative curiosities among the masses, especially about a transgender person's body can lead to objectification and dehumanization. When people reduce individuals to their physical

characteristics or focus solely on their genitalia, it can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and stigmatize transgender individuals.

“When people get to know that I am a transgender, the first thing that they are interested in to know is about my sex life. Some people do not ask this directly. They would ask questions like how could you have children, are you happy the way you are. But there have been moments when people simply ask to my face about my genitals, and how are they functioning, can we even satisfy our partners. These are very personal questions and they make us very uncomfortable.”

- *Lasith, Age 32 from Kurunegala*

Within the responses in the study it was underlined that the lack of awareness within the society on transgender men leads to asking overly personal or invasive questions about someone's gender identity or transition can be disrespectful and invasive. The shared life stories as above shows that due to the lack of awareness, the majority of the masses approach transgender people with insensitivity or mockery based on curiosity that result in hurtful experiences and perpetuate stereotypes.

Impacts of Religion

Religion has played a significant role in shaping societies, cultures, and individuals' beliefs and values for centuries. While it has often been a source of solace, community, and guidance for many, it has also been used as a tool to justify and perpetuate discrimination against marginalized groups, especially against communities with diverse gender identities, expressions and sexual orientations.

“I loved going to the temple. It was a place where I felt at peace. It was my escape place as my parents never questioned me when I told them that I am visiting the temple. As I got into the transitioning process, I could not visit the temple anymore. Even Though in Buddhism it says that being born a man is possible because of the merits we have done in our past lives, the monks are not ready to accept us as men.”

- *Sadun, age 25 from Avissawella*

Religions have traditionally held binary notions of gender, with a focus on the roles and expectations associated with men and women. These interpretations often frame gender as a divine order, prescribing specific behaviors, roles, and appearances for each gender. This binary understanding of gender can lead to the marginalization and stigmatization of transgender individuals, in this case transgender male community who do not conform to these rigid categories.

“I am a Muslim and I was born in a religious area. My religion does not accept my identity. As I was born a girl, I am supposed to cover myself all the time. If I visit my hometown the way I am now (current attire) it is considered a sin and I will be punished and shamed in front of the villages. If you are a Muslim you have to live the way you were born. As girls from birth, we are supposed to cover ourselves, get married and have children. We are supposed to do our duty to the society as women said in our religious books. They simply don't understand or recognize transgender persons, especially transgender men. Mawlawis' (Muslim religious leaders) see us as individuals who are filled with sin. I had to come out of my home town mainly because of their influence and even my family did not accept me in fear of the Mosque”

- *Mujad, Age 26 from Katunayake*

In a setting where religious traditions and practices reinforce gender norms, Sri Lankan Transgender men are ostracized, excluded or cannot take part in religious ceremonies, rituals, or communities because they do not fit into the traditional binary gender roles.

“I come from Hindu background. When it comes to the Northern part of the country, boys have to remove their shirts when they enter into Hindu religious places. I am to still undergo my gender affirmation surgeries and even if I have done the surgeries I am not comfortable to take off my shirt at a public place due to scars. Because of this I am either unable to do the rituals or get many negative gazes from the people if I am fully clothed. And if I tell the priest about transitioning, I will not be able to step foot onto the Kovil.”

- *Vishnu, Age 25 from Katunayake*

Education setting

Discrimination and stigma against transgender men in educational institutes persist as deeply concerning issues that hinder their pursuit of knowledge and personal growth. Despite increased awareness and legal protections, transgender students often face a hostile environment where they encounter prejudice, harassment, and exclusion.

“When schooling, uniform was the biggest problem. I hate wearing frocks and I had to wear one every single day to school.”

- *Suresh, Age 27 from Kandy*

Above was a common statement from all the participants in the study. Within the study it is seen that the transgender males often face discomfort when required to wear gender-specific uniforms in educational settings. These uniforms, typically designed for cisgender individuals, exacerbate the dysphoria experienced by transgender students. The incongruence between their true gender identity and the clothing they are forced to wear lead to feelings of alienation and anxiety. It becomes a daily reminder of their struggle to be recognized and respected for who they are. Moreover, these uniforms inadvertently disclose their transgender status to peers, potentially subjecting them to discrimination or unwanted attention.

“I didn’t face many challenges from the students. It may be because I did sports and was popular among the kids. But the teachers gave me a really hard time. They pressured me on my looks, my short hair, the way I dress, the way I talk to the way I walk. Sometimes they even called my parents to school to complain about me and discipline me.”

- *Prabath, Age 21 from Kegalle*

The data received at the study showed that verbal or physical bullying or harassment from peers or even educators is a common trait at education settings. 78% of the participants at the study stated that they have experienced bullying at least once at an educational setting where 59% of the participants stated that they have experienced bullying multiple times. Based on the experiences shared in the focus group discussions, bullying at educational settings has taken on both overt and subtle forms, ranging from verbal taunts and derogatory slurs to social isolation and cyberbullying. Participants stated that these experiences have profound and lasting effects on a transgender male's mental and emotional well-being, especially their academic performance.

“There was no one at school who truly understood me, or at least was ready to listen. I really loved going to school but by the time I did not. It was not because I didn’t like schooling but I felt like an outsider who did not belong there.”

- *Lahiru, Age 19 from Kurunegala*

86% of the participants in the study stated that the transgender men face a distressing lack of supportive, empathetic, and accepting environments within educational settings, especially from the educators. These individuals already face unique challenges in a society that often misunderstands or marginalizes them, and when their educators fail to provide a safe and inclusive environment, it only exacerbates their struggles. Derogatory comments, misgendering and lack of support lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression among transgender men. As participants stated, it hinders their academic performance, impedes their self-esteem and overall well-being, and even discourages them from pursuing their education altogether.

Employment

Transgender men often face a distressing and pervasive stigma and discrimination in the workplace that can significantly impact their professional and personal lives. This discrimination takes various forms, from subtle biases to outright exclusion.

“I applied for a vacancy at the head office of a corporate company. They called me for an in person interview. After the interview they said that I have all the required qualifications for the job position. However, because I am transitioning and my attire they said that they cannot hire me.”

- *Kushan, Age 24 from Colombo*

47% of the transgender men participated in the study stated that they face significant challenges when navigating the job application process due to the misalignment of their gender identity with the traditional expectations of potential employers. These barriers manifest in various ways, ranging from subtle biases to overt discrimination. For instance, participants stated that the employers unintentionally rely on gender stereotypes when assessing an applicant's qualifications or suitability for a particular role, which can result in transgender men being overlooked or unfairly judged. 71% of the participants stated that they encounter difficulties related to disclosing their preferred name and pronouns during the application process, fearing that this information could negatively impact their chances of securing employment.

“I am currently working at a food chain as a helper to the kitchen. It is mentally and physically a challenging job and I find it way more harder than my colleagues as I am working in an environment where people don't accept me. I am always given inhuman shifts by the management. Sometimes I have to finish working at 12 midnight and come to early shifts in the morning around 6am. The management also doesn't make me permanent in the workplace because I am transgender person. The people I work with also bullies me. They call me names and I always become the topic of insult. Sometimes I even work during my lunch hours simply to avoid contact with the workers.”

- *Nishadh, Age 29 from Biyagama*

Within the study, 54% of the participants stated that they have experienced discrimination in the workplace multiple times. As stated by the participants transgender men may confront a myriad of challenges at their workplaces that can significantly impact their professional well-being. Regrettably, many individuals in the workplace subject them to ridicule, harassment, and even exclusion from their colleagues. This hostile behavior not only creates an unwelcoming and hostile environment but also poses a substantial threat to the mental and emotional well-being of transgender men. The constant fear of discrimination and

prejudice erode their self-esteem and confidence, making it harder for them to fully engage and contribute to their work. This, in turn, has a direct and adverse effect on their productivity and job satisfaction.

“I currently work at a private company. I have worked there for 3 years. Recently a higher position within my company got vacant and I applied for it. I had more than enough qualifications for the position but the management did not even consider my application. Instead of giving me the promotion, the management degraded me into a lower position. I am humiliated and finding it really hard to be in that company anymore.”

- *Kevin, Age 28 from Moratuwa*

Promotion opportunities are limited for transgender men, and they find themselves facing significant obstacles in their pursuit of career advancement due to bias and ignorance. This issue is seen as a reflection of the broader challenges that transgender individuals often encounter in the workplace.

“I have tried to apply for several jobs at different companies. But honestly I find being a food delivery person is more satisfying as I am not pressured by anyone. I am a qualified person. Most of my friends earn more than me from their jobs. Even though what I earn is not sufficient to live within these economic conditions, I feel at ease because I don't have to explain myself to anyone.”

- *Keshan, Age 27 from Nugegoda*

Within the study, it was highlighted that the majority of the transgender male community members (64% of the participants of the study) engage in informal sector work. The participants stated that they do not feel comfortable within workspaces hence they prefer being self-employed or working at a place owned by their family, a relative or another community member. Due to these concerns, it was visible that the transgender male community is underemployed or working in jobs that do not match their qualifications, due to discrimination in the hiring process or lack of equal opportunities.

Access to Healthcare services

Access to healthcare is indeed widely recognized as a fundamental human right, as affirmed by various international declarations and agreements, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, the reality often falls short of this ideal, especially for marginalized communities such as transgender individuals. Transgender individuals, including transgender males, face unique and substantial challenges when attempting to access medical services. This vulnerability stems from a combination of systemic discrimination, societal biases, and a lack of understanding within healthcare systems.

“When I went to get my breast removal surgery, one of the doctors in Ragama hospital was continuously asking me questions; some unnecessary in a very loud voice. Everyone in the ward got to know that I am a transgender male which made my stay in the ward uncomfortable.”

- *Nisal, Age 26 from Wattala*

As reflected by the data collected from the participants, one of the foremost challenges faced by transgender men in healthcare settings is the pervasive lack of cultural competence among healthcare providers. Many healthcare professionals lack the knowledge and understanding required to address the unique needs and concerns of transgender individuals. This deficiency manifests in various ways, all of which can significantly impact the healthcare experiences of transgender individuals.

“I was attending to a friend of mine at the General Hospital, Colombo when he underwent his top surgery. In the middle of the night one of the attendants came to us and told us that they needed to inject a medicine and asked me to step away. When the attendant went away, my friend told me that they sexually harassed him and even touched his genitals. I was furious and rushed to make a complaint to the doctor who was in charge of the ward and he simply asked me to calm down and act rationally. He further told me not to make a huge fuss about the situation as it may lead to further issues and asked us to stay silent until my friend gets discharged.”

- *Chamath, Age 31 from Colombo*

According to the participants, the healthcare providers frequently display insensitivity when dealing with transgender patients. It manifests in a variety of ways, from inappropriate jokes or comments to a lack of understanding about the emotional and psychological challenges faced by transgender individuals. These insensitive and unempathetic behaviors exacerbate mental health challenges and deter transgender men from seeking the care they desperately

need. This reluctance cause severe consequences, as delayed or avoided healthcare lead to worsening health conditions and diminished overall well-being.

“At the general hospitals, there is a long queue to register for the breast removal surgery in Sri Lanka. Even when we wait all that time they still do not proceed with the surgeries saying that they do not require immediate attendance. I was admitted three times to proceed with my surgery and every time I was sent back saying that there are other surgeries that they have to prioritize that taking us in. These doctors simply cannot see the agony we live in every single day with a body we are not comfortable with.”

- *Nivantha, Age 27 from Kaduwela*

The participants stated that the access to gender-affirming care, including hormone therapy and gender-affirming surgeries, can be especially challenging for transgender men living in Sri Lanka. 62% of the participants stated that there is a shortage of dedicated transgender healthcare clinics and specialists in Sri Lanka, making it difficult for transgender men to access experienced and affirming care.

“We don’t have doctors who specialize in transgender inclusive health care. If we are thinking of removing our womb we have to admit in the general ward with women. Also we don't have enough information to make a decision on our own body. We always have self doubt on the medical procedures and honestly there is no one to ask about them.”

- *Sarith, Age 35 from Matale*

It is reflected in the data that one of the primary health disparities that transgender men face revolves around reproductive health. Despite their male gender identity, many transgender men retain their reproductive organs, including the uterus and ovaries. As a result, they may still experience menstrual cycles, undergo pregnancy, or require access to competent gynecological care. However, traditional healthcare systems and providers often overlook or lack understanding of these specific needs. Therefore, access to competent gynecological care is crucial for transgender men because it ensures the early detection of potential health issues, such as cervical cancer or reproductive health conditions. As a result, in absence of appropriate healthcare services, these individuals delay seeking medical attention, leading to late diagnoses and worse health outcomes. Furthermore, the psychological distress resulting from inadequate or insensitive care deter transgender men from seeking necessary medical help, exacerbating their health disparities.

“The only mental health care service we receive is until we get the GRC. After that it is nothing. Even though we know our identity, we need psychological support to keep our mental wellbeing. I think it is crucial for the transgender men to receive psychological

support at least for two years from the beginning of the transitioning process. It will really help our community to live a life with fulfillment”

- *Gihan, Age 24 from Meegoda*

Access to appropriate mental healthcare services is crucial for transgender men, as it significantly mitigate the impact of discrimination and alleviate mental health issues. 58% of the transgender men participated in the study stated that they have experienced emotional distress which have contribute to depressive symptoms, anxiety disorders, and even suicidal ideation. However, finding such services is an arduous task. Many healthcare providers lack the necessary training and cultural competence to address the unique needs of transgender individuals. As a result, transgender men may face additional challenges when seeking mental health support, including encountering healthcare professionals who are uninformed or insensitive about their experiences.

Within the study the participants also stated that the access to adequate health care services varies significantly based on geographic location, with urban and rural areas presenting starkly different scenarios. Participants said that in urban areas, there tend to be more resources and knowledgeable healthcare providers who are experienced in addressing the unique healthcare needs of transgender individuals. In contrast, transgender individuals residing in rural areas often face significant challenges when seeking transgender-inclusive healthcare. Rural areas tend to have fewer healthcare facilities and providers with expertise in transgender healthcare, if any at all. This lack of specialized care lead to long waiting times for appointments, limited treatment options, and even misinformed or discriminatory attitudes from healthcare professionals who may not be familiar with transgender healthcare guidelines.

One of the most concerning aspects of healthcare disparities is the need for individuals to travel long distances to access necessary services. This can impose a heavy financial burden on transgender individuals, as they often have to cover travel expenses, accommodation costs, and take time off work for appointments or surgeries. Additionally, traveling long distances may result in delayed or inconsistent care, which have negative impacts on both physical and mental health outcomes.

Further the participants stated that the systemic barriers they face also hinders them in accessing adequate healthcare services. In Sri Lanka, insurance coverage for transgender-specific care may be limited or often denied, making it financially challenging to receive necessary therapy or medication.

Recommendations

Uplifting the lives of the transgender male community in Sri Lanka requires a multifaceted approach that addresses various aspects of their well-being, including social acceptance, healthcare, legal rights, and economic opportunities.

- Expand legal recognition and advocacy towards legal protection: Recognize Gender and other SOCIESC acronyms under the constitution of Sri Lanka.
- Repeal/amend discriminatory legal provisions such as 365, 365A, 399, vagrant ordinance on LGBTIQ+ community.
- Urge to take necessary steps in passing and enacting the Gender equality bill under development by the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus.
- Recognize Rape, and non-consensual sex of all males under the common legal sections concerning rape, and sexual offences.
- Raise Awareness and Educate the masses on the unique challenges and issues of the transgender male community while expanding their awareness programs on diverse gender identities, expressions and sexual orientations.
- Establishing a safe space with the ability of temporary lodging and dropping in; safe house for Transgender Male Community.
- Create supportive networks and spaces towards transgender male community living in Sri Lanka.
- Create inclusive platforms for the transgender male community for networking.
- Groom professional expertise in providing transgender inclusive services in the health care sector especially extending Mental Health services and post-surgery care.
- Establish and develop dedicated transgender inclusive service institutions to assist transgender individuals in the gender affirmation process.

- Expand awareness on SOGIESC within the educational sector through introducing inclusive policies and approaches to train educators and service providers within the sector.
- Provide adequate knowledge for the government service providers on the services related to document change process of transgender individuals to mitigate inconveniences and harassment in receiving the services.
- Expand awareness on the inclusive language and terminologies, especially among service providers which could be used in approaching a transgender person.
- Adapt diversity and inclusive policies at workplaces to ensure a safe and inclusive environment for transgender persons.
- Ratify and enforce ILO Convention C190.
- Establish and develop transgender inclusive infrastructure, especially concerning sanitary facilities.
- Establishing mechanisms to address transphobia prevalent in society.