

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ABUSES - TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES OF THE TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY

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Abstract: The existence of transgender people is greatly neglected in our society. The term transgender is used to describe people whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex. The prevailing stories and misbeliefs about transgender community make them alienated from mainstream of the society. They are marginalized and stigmatized. They face discrimination in every walk of life. They suffer from prejudices, sexual assault, physical and verbal violence at an early age, often during their childhood. The studies suggest that like straight people, the transgender people too face sexual harassment, violence throughout their life from their intimate partners, family members, police officers, strangers and their acquaintances. These experiences lead to many distressing challenges like depression, mental illness, HIV and other venereal diseases and many more. Moreover they do not get social support even from their biological family and friends. They lack access to gender-sensitive health care and treatment because of their gender identity. The study is intended to expose traumatic experiences of sexual assault and abuses against the transgender people. As a representative of transgender community, the research paper critically examines *The Truth About Me – A Hijra Life Story*, an autobiography of A. Revathi. It brings sufferings and discrimination of transgender people to light.

Keywords: sexual harassment, abuses, violence, trauma, transgender

Introduction:

In the society we are living, gender role is very rigid and confined to a binary (male or female, boy or girl). 'Gender' and 'sex' are erroneously used as freely substitutable. However, gender is not static; it is an identification as a man, a woman or something else (LGBTQAI) and associated with a social role or set of behavioral and cultural traits. On the other hand sex tends to relate to biological characteristics. People who act differently to their assigned gender roles and society's perceptions of sexuality are considered as queer. The term transgender is used to describe people whose gender identity or expression does not match to their assigned sex at their birth. In the Indian subcontinent, transgender people are

known as hijra, eunuchs, intersex people, Aravani, Aruvani, Jogappa, Kinnar or Kinner. Our society is not liberal to accept transgender people as human beings.

Transgender people have to face atrocious experiences of sexual harassment, physical and verbal violence throughout their lifetime. The studies suggest that like straight people, the transgender people too face sexual harassment, violence from their intimate partners, family members, police officers, strangers and their acquaintances. Sexual violence affects the victim in many ways and it leads to many distressing challenges like depression, mental illness, HIV and other venereal diseases and many more. The 'Center for Disease Control and Prevention' (CDC) says that LGBTQAI people experience sexual violence at similar or higher rates than straight people. As a marginalized and stigmatized community transgender people are at greater risk of sexual harassment. According to the '2015 U.S Transgender Survey', at some point of their lifetime, 47% of transgender people are sexually assaulted. Their gender identity surrounded by discriminations make them hesitate to seek helps from police or hospital.

The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story is an autobiography of A. Revathi, a trans woman. In this moving and courageous autobiography she unfolds a multiple layers of her strife against prejudices, persecution, sexual assault, violence both within her biological family and the society outside. The research paper critically examines *The Truth About Me – A Hijra Life Story* to bring sufferings and discrimination of transgender people to light. Revathi who was born as Doraisamy narrates how she had to go through such traumatic experiences during her childhood. Revathi started feeling the unease of being trapped in wrong body since her childhood. After returning home from school she used to wear her sister's long skirt and blouse, twist a long towel around her head as a braid and then walk like a shy bride. Her family ignored her behaviour at that time reasoning she would outgrow all this. But the boys at her school and the people outside the house used to call her by the contemptuous terms such as 'female thing', 'Number 9', or 'female boy' etc. Revathi recalls a horrifying incident from her mid teenage memories. She used to visit hill-fort near her village with her friends who were like her struggling for their identity. One day, one of her friends was abducted and when she returned she was exhausted and could barely walk. She told that the men who carried her away had forced her to have anal and oral sex. Revathi was horrified and wondered if such things were indeed possible. Gradually she learns that there are people like her who behaves like women, wear saris and had an 'operation'. In the hijra community 'having an operation' is to undergo 'nirvaanam' i.e. to submit to castration and

turn into a full woman. A thayamma operation is performed by one hijra on another; and the operation performed by a doctor takes place in a hospital. But the hijras who had nirvaanam by thayamma enjoy special status and are more respected in their community. When Revathi and one of her gurubai chelas underwent this operation they did not have access to gender-sensitive health care and treatment because of their gender identity. After the operation both of them were screaming and crying in pain but no one paid attention to them just because they were hijras. Revathi pours out her sorrow that hijras are not considered human. She ponders, even a crippled person or a blind person can attract pity and people help them. Someone who experiences physical hurt is cared by her family and whoever comes to know about it. Then why society make them feel that a hijra's life is a burden?

Revathi ran away to Delhi to get rid of constant harassment at the hands of her family, villagers and the society. For hijra, living alone is not easy and can bring a host problems. A hijra can become a chela to anyone and must follow necessarily the rules of the community which are by and large good. Once Revathi left her old guru and started living with her new guru. Unlike her old guru's home, now she had to live in a jopdi. There were no separate rooms; her guru, two gurubais and her gurubai chela all had to live in that jopdi near the railway station. Sometimes they had to sleep on road that ran in front of the jopdi. In India, hijras are miserably marginalized economically. They have no choice but to beg or to do sex work. She took up sex work to earn her livelihood. The men who used to come were mostly drunk. Once a man held a knife to her and forced her to have anal sex. As Revathi and other hijras had to sleep on road, local rowdies used to come near their jopdi and would look them up and down. They used to frighten Revathi and other hijras by throwing lighted matchsticks on them. But they were helpless and could not go to police as they were in a trade that invited such affronts. Many such things happened in day time that they started living in constant fear. To get over this feeling of vulnerability and to be able to sleep, she took to drinking. Revathi also tells about other hijras who become chela and live with their guru. If they get involved in sex work, many times they are treated more or less like prisoners. They have to work for three or more years, earn money for them and their guru and only then they would be sent home. They are not paid much. Even when they go to toilet they are watched. The circumstances corroded her spirit and to get rid of it she ran away from that place. Like women, travelling alone at night is not safe for hijras. Once, during her overnight journey one of the bus drivers tried to sexually abuse her. Revathi says it is difficult to survive as a woman in this world. When Revathi returned home after a long time her father did not talk to

her because she has started living like a woman. Her mother started yelling and crying that Revathi had buried their honor and clothed them in shame. Her elder brothers started abusing her. They said it did not matter to them if she was alive or dead. They wanted her father to disown her from the share of property. They threatened to kill her.

Revathi's autobiography narrates multiple incidents of brutal torture. The experience at the police station left her heart broken. Police are supposed to safeguard them, but they too harass hijras by using offensive and sexually violent language. Hijras have to bribe them to escape the torture and humiliation. Once a policeman forcefully put her behind the bars. He made her take her clothes off and asked other prisoners to watch her naked. He kicked her with his boots. Revathi felt intensely ashamed and raged but she was mightless. After gone through all those experiences of abuses, humiliation and violence, Revathi joined SANGAMA, the organization that works for LGBTQ community. Here she felt in love with one of her senior colleagues. They got married and started to live together. Revathi always desired to marry an educated man and have a family. Her dream came true. But the happiness did not last long. Soon he lost all desire for her and their ways parted. In hijra parivars the guru usually does not allow her chela to get married. They think that a hijra cannot afford to fall in love and get married. Even if someone gets married there are great chances of suffering at the hands of her husband. The hijra get abused and hurt. Revathi narrates a story of her friend Shakuntala's married life. Her husband would take her cash which she had earned by begging, blow it all up in a gambling den, come to her house and beat her up. He got drunk often and would rush to her house and demand money. Eventually Shakuntala got tired of losing her earnings and asked him to leave. But he retorted that he would not leave her and allow her to take up another man. Scared and vulnerable, Shakuntala had to earn for her and that man by begging as there was no other choice left for her. After separating from her husband something devastating happened in Revathi's life. She lost one of her chelas and her guru. She felt a huge sense of loss and she thought if she should continue to live. She was restless, sad, confused and pained. She convinced herself that she ought to carry out the research on aravanis. She realized that her work was the only healing balm that she needed.

Conclusions: The prevailing stories and misbeliefs about transgender community make them alienated from mainstream of the society. They are marginalized and stigmatized. They face discrimination in every walk of life. Hijras are never allowed to enter the mainstream of the society. Horrendous experiences of sexual assault, physical and verbal abuse become part of their day to day life. They have to suffer at the hands of all sort of men. Revathi asks, why

hijras are treated with no respect? Would a time come when they would be freed from being humiliated? Revathi's autobiography unfolds nature of harassment and violence against transgender people. It alarms the need of emancipation of transgender. They want to live a life of dignity. They long for respect. Family and society should realize their physical and psychological crisis. Government should take initiative to develop awareness programs relating transgender community. Medical assistance should be arranged for affected people. There should be strict law to safeguard their rights and to prevent any kind of harassment and violence against them. The Supreme Court has recognized trans genders as the third gender. This judgment has brought positive change in the life of transgender. They are gaining rapid visibility in all walks of life. With the support of family, society and the government they can get equal opportunity to lead a normal life and social acceptance.

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