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School Experiences of Transgender: The Interaction of Gender and Residential Status

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the various disruptive experiences of transgenders with their peer groups, schoolmates, teachers, and other people in the school. The term 'transgender' in the study refers to 'hijra' in Indian society. The present study is an empirical study in which family experiences of transgenders were extracted by using an interview schedule. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many transgender people have left the city and gone to some unknown place. Therefore, an accidental sample from the transgender people available with NGOs or otherwise was taken, comprising 80 respondents. The data collected were analysed by using the tabulation method. The findings revealed that transgender students are bullied and harassed at school because of their dressing sense and hairstyle. Many transgender students do not want to participate in any outdoor games because of the fear of harassment and shame associated with their gender identity, and the rest who want to participate are discouraged by school authorities. Classmates avoided seats near to them and passed transphobic comments. In the school, both teachers and students refer to transgender students using the wrong pronouns, and they are subjected to gender suggestive abuse. Transgender students have a lack of freedom to express their choice to make friends, and they have to face more difficulties when rumours are spread that coming in contact with transgender would make people sick. They are not able to dress according to their expressed gender. Rather they dress either to meet societal expectations or due to the fear of punishment. Transgender students have a right to access toilets that match their affirmed gender, but the study reveals that there are no separate toilet facilities for transgender students, and therefore they have to use male toilets where they are predisposed to sexual assault and harassment. The findings help to make fellow students, teachers, and other people in the school aware of transgender issues and provide better knowledge for framing norms to make schools inclusive for transgender students.

Keywords: School Experiences, Hijra, Transgender, COVID-19

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses various disruptive experiences of transgenders with their peer groups, schoolmates, teachers, and other people in the school. The well-being of transgender has received a great deal of public attention, particularly in educational settings. In our traditional educational system, all children are assumed to conform to cultural gender norms based on their physique. When a child deviates from these standards, the school can become an uncomfortable place, and that can negatively impact the child's social, emotional, and cognitive development. A child's school experience can either strengthen or weaken their sense of self. Furthermore, in order to learn well, children must feel emotionally protected. The ideal atmosphere for all children is the supportive school where bullying and teasing are not tolerated, and students are actively taught to appreciate and celebrate differences. This is especially true for gender-nonconforming and transgender youngsters, who are regularly teased and bullied. If a youngster is subjected to discrimination at school on a frequent basis, he or she will not feel emotionally safe and will most likely struggle academically. When transgender students face discrimination and persecution in school, they are more likely to experience despair, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts than their non-transgender peers. The absence of representative datasets that include items measuring sexual orientation and gender identity limits knowledge about the magnitude of differences. The magnitude of gender identity-related disparities in school and perceptions of school climate are the subjects of this study. Although existing research documents persistently show hostile school climates for LGBTQA as a group, however little is known about the school experiences and perceptions of school climate unique to male to female transgender. This paper explores the school experiences of transgender with particular consideration of dressing and hairstyle, choosing games, school uniform, gendered aspects of presentation, experience with friends, toilet facility, and other issues associated with their gender identity.

II. THE RESPONDENTS

People's social and economic background does not only determine their life opportunities but also provides them with a specific outlook towards life to face social reality; it also enables them to determine their attitudes and behavioural patterns. The study clearly substantiates the fact that the level of acceptability of transgender persons by their parents and family members is awfully low. The financial position of transgender persons is quite weak, and a large section of transgender people are denied the right to have a housing facility and decent standard of living. It is a matter of concern that most of them are denied the right to education even after

the enactment of the Right to Education Act, 2009. In a nutshell, absence of family support, low economic status, hostile attitude of the society, poor housing facility, absence of property ownership, low education level, and absence of legal documents of identity such as Aadhaar card, PAN card and Election voter ID card are the common problems of the transgender people. Hostile attitudes of the society bound them to keep their relationship secret from the community at large because their relationship is not recognised by society. Illiteracy and the lack of legal documents push them to traditional hijra occupation and hinder their access to various social protection and livelihood promotions schemes such as bank loans, microcredit etc. Despite all such problems, most transgender people have access to one form of media channel or the other.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Guwahati city, an emerging metropolis in North East India, comparatively tolerable to transgender people and mainly having their concentration. The term 'transgender' in the study refers to 'hijra' in Indian society. Transgender people in Guwahati city constituted the universe and each of transgender people, a unit for data collection, in the study. For the study, oral data were collected from the transgender people selected from different locations of Guwahati city; namely, Railway colony, Maligaon; Joymati Nagar, Adabari; BG colony, Maligaon; Pragjyotish Nagar, Jalukbari; Shakuntala colony, Pandu; Ajanta path, Hatigaon; Khanka Road, Hatigaon; and Gandhi Basti, Silpukhuri. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many transgender people have left Guwahati city and gone to some unknown place. Therefore, an accidental sample from the transgender people available with NGOs or otherwise was taken, comprising 80 respondents. Besides, the snowball sampling method was also used to find out respondents. Data was collected by using interviews, observation, and case study techniques.

IV. SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF TRANSGENDER

School experiences of transgender with particular factors of dressing & hairstyle, choosing games, gendered aspects of presentation, choosing friends, school uniform, toilet facility, and other aspects related to gender identity and gender expression have been taken into consideration.

The following are the major findings:

(A) School Experience of Dressing and Hairstyle

When it came to how transgender students dressed and displayed their gender, they were frequently subjected to strict monitoring. Gender-affirming clothing and hairstyle are key

elements of social transition, making such limitations particularly unpleasant and humiliating for transgender youth. The largest number of the respondents are bullied and harassed at school and are from rural residences. Over two-fifths, (42.86%) of the respondents are bullied and harassed at school because of their dress sense and hairstyle and the rest are mocked by students for wearing bangle and using nail polish, punished for wearing feminine attire and having hair like a girl, and small portion have allowed by the school authority to wear cross-gender attire on special occasions. A similar pattern is observed among the urban and rural respondents. However, there are two main differences. The first difference is that a higher number of respondents of rural residents are bullied and harassed at school because of their dress sense and hairstyle and the second difference is that all of the rural respondents are discouraged by the school authority to wear cross-gender attire. It indicates the mindset of rural people are trained to only divide persons into the heterosexual binary of male and female, and therefore transgender students are being judged and harassed on the basis of their outward appearance.

(B) School Experience of Choosing Games

Children who identify as the gender matching their sex at birth tend to fall toward the games stereotypically associated with that gender. Transgender children do the same with the gender they identify as, and they are showing strong identities and preferences that are different from their assigned sex. The largest number of the respondents do not want to participate in the outdoor game and are from rural residences. Near about one-third (30.95%) of the respondents do not want to participate in the outdoor game because of the shame associated with their gender identity, and the rest are neither included in the boy's team nor in the girl's team because people consider physically transgenders are stronger than girls and weaker than boys, deliberately touched by boys on their private body parts during the game, not allowed by their teachers to play with girls, and a small portion of them are not allowed by the school authority to participate in any type of outdoor sports. A similar pattern is observed among the urban and rural respondents. However, there are two main differences. The first difference is that none of the respondents of rural residence is touched by boys on their private body parts during the game. This is because urban students are encouraged to play outdoor games, and therefore, they are at greater risk of physical abasement as compared to rural students. The second difference is that all of the rural respondents are discouraged by the school authority to participate in any type of outdoor sports. This is because, in the rural school, other cisgender students feel ashamed to play with transgender individuals and hence protest against the inclusion of them in any type of outdoor sports.

(C) School Experience Regarding Gendered Aspects of Presentation

Perceived gender presentation or the way others view a person along with a range from masculine to feminine can play a role in experiences of stigma. Transgender people who dress and act in ways that are incongruent with societal expectations of their birth-assigned sex are at heightened risk of mistreatment. The largest number of the respondents are taunted by the boys and are from rural residences. Over one-fifth (23.81%) of the respondents are taunted by the boys with the designation 'Half Ladies' and the rest are avoided by their classmates to sit near them because of their gender non-conforming behaviour, neither accepted as a boy nor as a girl and they used to face transphobic comments because of their gender expression, ridiculed by peers because of their feminine gait and masculine voice, not called by their correct name and referred as 'she' instead of 'he' because of their feminine gait, and a small portion of them are subjected to gender suggestive abuse by their teachers. A similar pattern is observed among the urban and rural respondents. However, there are two main differences. The first difference is that none of the rural respondents is called by their incorrect name, i.e., no one referred to them as 'she' instead of 'he'. It indicates that rural students are less likely to hang out with their transgender peers as compared to urban students. The second difference is that none of the urban respondents is subjected to gender suggestive abuse by their teachers. It indicates that urban teachers have more awareness about the issues related to transgender people, and they know how to treat such students who belong to the category beyond the gender binary.

(D) School Experience with Friends

Children who identify as the gender matching their sex at birth tend to fall toward friendships stereotypically associated with that gender. Transgender children do the same with the gender they identify as, and they are showing strong identities and preferences that are different from their assigned sex. The largest number of the respondents are ridiculed by peers and are from urban residences. Over one-fourth (28.57%) of the respondents are ridiculed by peers for liking the company of girls to that of boys, and the rest are chastised by teachers for sitting with girls in the class instead of boys, hesitant to talk to male students because of their sexual orientation, scolded by teachers for sitting and playing with girls instead of boys, and a small portion of them felt isolated because the rumour was spread in the school that coming in contact with transgender would make people sick. A similar pattern is observed among the urban and rural respondents. However, there are two main differences. The first difference is that a larger number of rural respondents are chastised by teachers for sitting with girls in the class instead of boys. It indicates that rural teachers are not adequately trained to identify the issues related to transgender people and make false assumptions about a person's gender based on how they

present themselves physically. The second difference is that most of the rural respondents felt isolated because the rumour like coming in contact with transgender would make people sick. Such rumours spread easily because of the low population, closeness, and strong connectivity among individuals in rural areas.

(E) School Experience Regarding School Uniform

School uniforms are supposedly meant to bring a sense of inclusiveness among students, but transgender students often face internal struggles while following gender-specific dress codes in school. They are facing such struggles because their preferences are different from their assigned sex. The majority of the respondents used to wear boys' attire to meet societal expectations and are from rural residences. Over half (52.38%) of the respondents used to wear boys' attire to meet societal expectations, and the rest used to wear boys' attire because of the fear of punishment by the school authority, and a small portion of them used to wear boys' attire by their own choice. A similar pattern is observed among the urban and rural respondents. However, there are two main differences. The first difference is that a larger number of rural respondents used to wear boys' attire to meet societal expectations. This is because rural people are more traditional, conservative, and collectivistic, and they have to depend on each other for their livelihood, and due to this, it becomes their responsibility to meet societal expectations by following the norms made by society. The second difference is that most of the urban respondents used to wear boys' attire by their own choice. This is because urban people are more liberal, individualistic, and resourceful as compared to rural people, and therefore they are able to exercise their own choice.

(F) School Experience Regarding Toilet Facility

For transgender students, even going to the toilet at school can be a terrible experience. When a school prevents a student from using the toilet that corresponds to their gender identity, then the student's gender identity itself is undermined. The largest number of the respondents are followed into the toilet and often teased by male students and are from rural residences. Over one-third (35.71%) of the respondents are followed into the toilet and often teased by male students, and the rest of them did not face any difficulties in access to a toilet, denied using the female toilet by school authority because other female students did not want to share their toilet with them, either used to go girl's toilet as it had locking facility or go to the toilet during class hour so that no one could see them and a small portion of them used to pee in the bushes near the school so that no one could see them. A similar pattern is observed among the urban and rural respondents. However, there are three main differences. The first difference is that only

rural respondents used to pee in the bushes near the school so that no one could see them. This is because bushes are available in more quantities as compared to urban areas, and open urination is a part of people's lives and daily habits in rural areas. The second difference is that a larger number of the rural respondents are followed into the toilet and teased often by male students. It indicates that school administration in rural areas is less careful about the safety and dignity of transgender children. The third difference is that a larger number of the urban respondents did not face any difficulties in access to a toilet. It indicates that urban schools have better infrastructure, and the administration is more concerned about the safety and security of trans children.

(G) Shared Problems Facing in School

Sharing problems is the best way of facing and overcoming them. When such conversations go well, it helps immensely to overcome such bitter experiences. Acceptance and support are often considered vital steps in the healing process. The largest number of the respondents did not share their problems with anyone and are from rural residences. Over two-fifths, (47.62%) of the respondents did not share their problems with anyone. However, 23.81% of the respondents did share their problems with family members, and the rest of them shared with friends and teachers of their respective schools. Residence-wise, most of the rural respondents did not share their problems with anyone. It indicates that rural respondents are less vocal because, in rural areas, greater importance is attached to the family than to the individual, which results in the weak bonding between parents and their children. More number of respondents who belong to urban residences choose a friend to share their problems as compared to respondents who belong to rural residences. This is because it is easier to make friends in urban areas because of the cultural heterogeneity and greater acceptability of gender-diverse people. However, surprisingly none of the rural respondents shared problems with their teachers. It indicates that the teachers in rural areas are not that much connected to their students so that they can instill the confidence to speak out about their problems.

V. CONCLUSION

In this study, school experiences of transgender with particular factors of dressing & hairstyle, choosing games, gendered aspects of presentation, choosing friends, school uniform, toilet facility, and other aspects related to gender identity and gender expression have been discussed. The study reveals that transgender students are bullied and harassed at school because of their dressing sense and hairstyle. This lack of awareness about transgender people and their gender expression has led not only students but also teachers to be participants in bullying and

harassment. Many transgender students do not want to participate in any outdoor games because of the fear of harassment and shame associated with their gender identity, and the rest who want to participate are discouraged by school authorities. Due to their gender non-conforming behaviour, classmates avoided sitting near them and passed transphobic comments. In the school, both teachers and students refer to transgender students using the wrong pronouns, and they are subjected to gender suggestive abuse. Choosing to disrespect someone's pronouns is not just oppressive, but it can also be deemed violent. Transgender students have a lack of freedom to express their choice to make friends, and they have to face more difficulties when rumours are spread that coming in contact with transgender would make people sick. Transgender students often face internal struggles while following gender-specific dress codes in school. They are not able to dress according to their expressed gender. Rather they dress either to meet societal expectations or due to the fear of punishment. Transgender students have a right to access toilets that match their affirmed gender, but the study reveals that there are no separate toilet facilities for transgender students, and therefore they have to use male toilets where they are predisposed to sexual assault and harassment. Some of them either used to go girl's toilet as it has a locking facility or goes to the toilet during class hours so that no one could see them. Despite all the difficulties and challenges that they face, many transgender students do not share their problems with anyone. It indicates that up to what extent transgender people are socialised to internalise feelings rather than raising their voices. Although more young people are nowadays accepting transgender identities than ever before, however within the confines of school, acceptance of their sexuality and freedom to openly express their gender choices still remain a constant struggle for transgender people. In conclusion, we can say that once educational institutions become their allies across the country, future generations will have a better chance of living up to the ideals of equality.

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