

Educational Exclusion and Social Stigma: Struggles of Transgender Individuals in Higher Education in Kerala

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the social inequalities in access to higher education among transgender individuals in Kerala, despite the state's progressive stance on social welfare and education. While Kerala boasts high literacy rates, transgender individuals still continue to face significant barriers in accessing and succeeding in higher education. These barriers include social stigma, discrimination, lack of inclusive infrastructure, and inadequate support systems within academic institutions. This study utilizes qualitative methods, including interviews with transgender individuals, educators to identify key challenges such as gender-based exclusion, mental health struggles, economic hardships, and the absence of tailored support programs in universities and colleges. The research further examines the educational struggles faced by the transgender individuals and the effectiveness of existing government policies and welfare schemes aimed at supporting transgender individuals in education, such as reservations, and the gaps in their implementation. Findings highlight the urgent need for inclusive academic environments, gender-sensitive curricula, and improved institutional policies to foster the participation of transgender individuals in higher education. The paper calls for targeted interventions to address systemic discrimination and ensure equitable access to higher education for transgender people in Kerala.

Keywords: Transgender, Inequalities, Higher Education, Kerala

1. Introduction

Gender identification is often seen as a fundamental aspect of an individual's life. Traditionally, a person's sex is assigned at birth, and this designation shape their social and legal identity. However, this process is not always straight forward, as a small percentage of individual experiences a disconnect between the sex assigned to them at birth and the gender the identify with. These individuals are commonly referred to as 'transgender' (American Psychological Society). India's transgender population, often referred to as hijras, has long been marginalized by society. Despite the recognition of transgender rights under the Indian Constitution and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, this group continues to face extreme prejudice, particularly in educational settings. Kerala, a state in southern India known for its impressive literacy rates and progressive social policies, is no exception. Even in a state with high levels of education and gender equality, transgender students encounter numerous obstacles, both from the institutional structures of education and from the prevailing social stigma.

Educational inclusion is one of the most significant challenges faced by transgender individuals. While Kerala has introduced certain legal frameworks aimed at transgender inclusion, such as the Kerala State

Transgender Policy (2015), there are still gaps in the implementation of these policies. Moreover, the societal attitude toward transgender people worsen their struggles, making it difficult for them to feel safe, supported, or empowered within educational settings.

This research paper aims to explore the problems faced by transgender individuals in higher education Kerala, and the barriers they face. It focuses on the systemic barriers they encounter in colleges and universities, the social stigma they experience both in educational contexts and wider society, and the implications of these issues for their academic success and mental health. The study also highlights the importance of creating inclusive educational spaces and suggests actionable steps that can be taken to ensure greater acceptance and support for transgender students.

Methodology

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, which includes qualitative interviews and secondary data analysis. The primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with 30 transgender individuals from different regions of Kerala. These individuals were selected from various age groups (18-40 years), educational backgrounds (primary, secondary, and tertiary education), and gender identities. Participants were asked about their experiences with educational institutions, social stigma, and their strategies for coping with discrimination. Secondary data sources, such as government policies, reports from NGOs, and educational statistics, were reviewed to contextualize the findings within the broader framework of Kerala's educational landscape.

2. Review of Literature

Raji L and Dr.Jaya Prakash Tiwari(2024) find out through their study that Transgender students dropped out from their education in the high school level itself. They also referred the Transgender Policy introduced by the Government of Kerala and pointed out according to this policy, if the government,policymakers,education department and the Society think together, transgender students can reach their highest standard of living.

Dr. Richa Mehta and Muskan Sharma (2023), conducted a study on 'Transgender Education in India: Status and Challenges' and dealt with challenges, problems and demographic features. They mainly focused on the on the educational and employment status of the transgender community in order to identify the aspects of life in which they face discrimination. In addition, it addresses how transgender people are excluded from society and how law and order is working to encourage them to become socially included. Das (2016) found that, Transgender individuals in Kerala are frequently subjected to verbal and physical abuse within the educational system, which often leads to dropping out or switching to alternative forms of education. This exclusion from traditional educational pathways limits their opportunities for economic mobility and social integration.

Anugya Mitra (2017) studied the educational inequalities of transgender in India. she concluded her study with a strong statement that the harassment and marginalization of the community still continues and the social prejudice still exists against Transgender. She recommended that transgender have been taken as backward community and they will be entitled for all benefits in education and jobs still the government and private agencies need to start focusing on implementing the order so that the benefits start reaching to the transgender community.

Nanda (2014), In Kerala, despite the state's progressive image, transgender students still encounter significant challenges in education. Studies have shown that the state's educational system, although publicly supported by progressive policies, is often not equipped to handle issues related to gender

diversity. According to the Kerala State Transgender Policy (2015), the state government recognizes the need for inclusive education but has not fully implemented all the proposed measures.

3. Legal and Policy Context in Kerala

Kerala has taken significant steps to ensure the rights and welfare of transgender people. The state government's "Transgender Policy" (2015) was a pioneering effort, focusing on various aspects of social inclusion, including education, healthcare, and employment (Government of Kerala, 2015). The policy aims to provide equal opportunities for transgender individuals, including ensuring access to education without discrimination. Additionally, the Kerala Transgender Welfare Board, established in 2019, aims to ensure the implementation of transgender welfare policies and schemes.

Higher education institutions in Kerala have also introduced certain measures to address the needs of transgender students. For instance, the University of Kerala now includes a separate column for transgender students in its admission forms, allowing them to self-identify their gender (University of Kerala, 2020). Despite these initiatives, there is a significant gap in the realization of these policies in day-to-day academic life, with transgender students continuing to experience exclusion and marginalization.

4. Challenges Faced by Transgender Students in Higher Education

4.1. Social Stigma and Discrimination

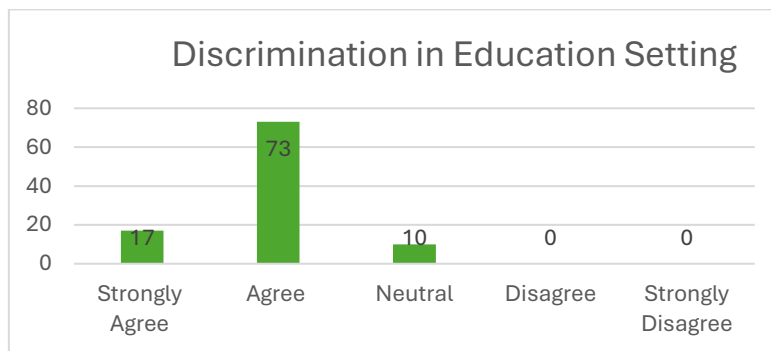
Transgender students in Kerala continue to face significant stigma within educational institutions. Even though Kerala is known for its progressive social policies, there is deep-rooted prejudice and social discomfort surrounding transgender people. Discrimination from peers, faculty members, and even administrative staff remains a major barrier for transgender students. Many transgender students face verbal abuse, exclusion from peer groups, and bullying, which negatively impact their academic performance and emotional well-being (Reddy 2018). This social stigma is compounded by a lack of awareness and sensitivity among faculty and students. The traditional gender norms ingrained in academic institutions often lead to transgender students being marginalized, with little support from the university administration (Anjali, 2019).

Social stigma is not confined to schools or any higher education institutions. Many transgender individuals in Kerala experience rejection from their families and communities, which can lead to further marginalization. Family support plays a significant role in the educational journey of transgender students, and lack of such support often forces transgender students to drop out of college or pursue education in less conventional settings.

Response of Discrimination and Harassment in Educational Settings faced by Transgender Individuals

Particulars	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	5	17%
Agree	22	73%
Neutral	3	10%
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	30	100%

Source: Primary Data



The above table and diagramme reveals that 90 percentage of the respondents faced various discriminations and harassments like bullying, verbal abuse etc. from their educational institutions. This would negatively impact in their academic performance.

4.2. Lack of Infrastructure and Support System

One of the significant barriers for transgender students in Kerala’s higher education system is the lack of infrastructure and institutional support. Higher educational institutions do not have gender-neutral restrooms, and transgender students often face challenges in accessing safe and appropriate facilities, particularly in residential settings such as hostels. According to a report by the Kerala State Transgender Federation (2020), transgender students are often forced to use facilities that do not correspond to their gender identity, which can lead to emotional distress and social isolation. Moreover, there is a lack of counseling and mental health services specifically designed to address the needs of transgender students. The absence of trained counselors who are familiar with issues related to gender dysphoria and the challenges faced by transgender individuals further exacerbates the psychological strain on transgender students.

4.3. Psychological and Emotional Barriers

Transgender students often experience significant emotional distress due to societal rejection, discrimination, and isolation in educational settings. The transgender students are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and feelings of exclusion, which can severely impact their academic performance. The lack of tailored mental health support for transgender students leaves them vulnerable to these challenges, making it harder for them to succeed in their studies and fully participate in academic life.

4.4. Discrimination in Admission and Curriculum

Despite policy reforms, the admissions process in many higher education institutions still fails to accommodate the needs of transgender applicants. Transgender students often face difficulties in navigating application forms that do not recognize their gender identity or provide space for them to disclose their gender in a way that aligns with their lived experience. Furthermore, the curriculum in many fields of study is still rooted in binary gender norms, and there is a lack of representation of transgender individuals in the academic content and discourse.

4.5. Mental Health and Academic Performance

The compounded effects of discrimination and exclusion significantly impact the mental health of transgender students. Many reported feelings of depression, anxiety, and low self-worth. These mental health struggles were shown to negatively affect their academic performance, leading to higher dropout rates and lower levels of academic engagement. Despite the challenges, many transgender individuals developed strategies for coping with the discrimination they faced, such as relying on peer support, engaging in LGBTQ+ advocacy, or pursuing education in alternative settings like open universities or on-

line platforms.

5. Efforts to Address Challenges

5.1. Government Initiatives

The Kerala government has launched several initiatives to support transgender students. These include scholarships, financial aid, and special educational schemes to ease their access to higher education (Government of Kerala, 2015). Along with that the Social Justice Department of the government initiated various schemes like, Yathnam Scheme for Transgenders Preparing for Competitive exams, Varnam Scheme for TG Students Pursuing Distance Education Courses, Saphalam Scheme for TG students pursuing Professional Courses, etc. (Social Justice Department, Government of Kerala). Additionally, the state has introduced public awareness campaigns aimed at reducing societal stigma and promoting transgender inclusion.

5.2. Institutional Reforms

Several universities in Kerala have implemented policies to make higher education more inclusive for transgender students. The University of Kerala, for instance, has introduced separate admission forms that allow students to self-identify as transgender (University of Kerala, 2020). Some institutions have also begun training faculty and staff to increase awareness about transgender issues and improve the campus environment for transgender students.

5.3. Civil Society and NGO Support

NGOs like the Kerala State Transgender Federation and Sahodari Foundation have played a crucial role in advocating for the rights of transgender students in Kerala's higher education system. These organizations provide support through mentorship, legal aid, and peer networks, helping transgender students navigate the challenges they face (Sahodari Foundation, 2020).

Findings of the Study

1. Majority of the Transgender Students (90%) experienced various discriminations and harassment from their educational institutions.
2. The current school environment, infrastructure facilities are not conducive to Transgender students.
3. 77 % of the Transgender students said that the various policies and programme implemented in the education system are not at all inclusive of transgender students.
4. 80 % of the Transgender students reported that the institution they are studying never have gender neutral bathroom and gender neutral rest room facility.
5. The curriculum is not inclusive of transgender students.
6. Parents, Society, Peers, Teachers and managements have no proper idea about the real problem faced by the transgender students and their solutions

Conclusion and Recommendation

Transgender students in Kerala's higher education system continue to face significant challenges, despite the state's progressive policies and legal protections. Social stigma, discrimination, lack of infrastructure, and insufficient mental health support are some of the key barriers that hinder their academic success and overall well-being. Although there have been notable efforts by the government, higher education institutions, and civil society organizations to address these issues, there is still a long way to go in creating a truly inclusive and supportive environment for transgender students. By fostering inclusive education,

Kerala can ensure that transgender individuals are not only able to access education but can also thrive within it, contributing to the state's broader goals of social equity and justice.

Based on the findings and analysis presented in this study, the following recommendations are by the researcher for further enhance the study and address key areas for future exploration.

1. The higher education institutions in Kerala should implement and rigorously enforce anti-discrimination policies that protect transgender students.
2. Educational institutions should introduce mandatory training programs for teachers, administrators, and staff on gender identity, transgender issues, and creating an inclusive environment. These programs should also focus on dismantling harmful stereotypes and biases about gender nonconforming students.
3. The Universities and Colleges should provide comprehensive counseling services and support networks tailored to the needs of transgender students. This includes gender-sensitive mental health support, peer mentoring programs, and safe spaces where transgender students can share their experiences.
4. Outreach programs targeting families, communities, and local organizations should be initiated to educate them on the importance of supporting transgender individuals in education.
5. Educational institutions should ensure that gender-neutral restrooms and other facilities are made available to transgender students, ensuring that they feel safe and respected within the educational environment.

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