

## Article

# De-Identifying the Distressed in the Transgender Community Related to Their Identity Formation and Discrimination in India

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**Abstract:** Transgender people in India hold a dualistic perspective on their identity. In one way, they are considered a disgraceful entity in society and, at the same time, they resemble the “Ardhanareswar” version of the Hindu God Shiva (Ardhanareswar version of Shiva: among Shiv’s many avatars, Ardhanareswar is the only one in which the god embodied both genders in a single amalgamation. That represented both the male and female gender). Also, they have been referred to as derogatory names, which are often used as slang for men who are “not man enough” and more resemble femininity. In the case of the trans women community, they are caught up in the binary status of gender, which completely ignores the third gender, and hence suffer along with the secondary status of womanhood in Indian society. In this perspective, there was and is gradual exclusion and discrimination against the trans women community. Gender identity and available occupational choice influence their occupational decision making. In this regard, the present study tries to explore the identity formation and discrimination faced by the transgender community in Sambalpur, Western Odisha. Furthermore, it tries to understand the construction of their identity through the theory of Othering. It also strives to look at the impact of discrimination on their personal, social, and health prospects in the community and evaluate the impact of the schemes implemented for them. The study is conducted among 45 trans women in the Sambalpur city in Western Odisha. Based on its prejudices, Indian society continues to create transgender identity. To give them proper recognition, government scheme assistance is insufficient at times, and people’s mindsets must be changed.

**Keywords:** transgender identity; othering; social exclusion; discrimination



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## 1. Introduction

In a stratified human society, everybody lives embracing the differences among us. As discussed by McLeod and Nonnemaker (1999) and Manstead (2018), the difference is natural. However, problems arise when those differences are used to create an oppressive situation by stereotyping the community or individual or instilling prejudice in one another. In their research paper, Postmes et al. (2016) elaborated that, as a human society, we always crave to belong to a specific community, which later fuels and shapes our identity. Thomas et al. (2016) put light on the attachment to a group that leads to creating a group-based identity. This, in turn, fuels the feeling of belongingness among the group members. In the same context, people who are not part of any group become outcasts by generating prejudiced attitudes toward them. Various concepts support such an occurrence, with Sumner (1960) proposing the concept of in-group and out-group in terms of a person’s sense of belonging to a group. Just like that, we have various forms of group formation across society, including those along the lines of gender, socioeconomic status, race, caste, and many more.

Among the diversified differences, one that stands out very deeply in society is the difference based on gender. Connell (2009) elucidated in her book that, whenever there will

be a discussion on gender differences, the perspective is usually binary, which means we visualise the gender difference in terms of men and women. [Wagaman \(2015\)](#) emphasised a large LGBTQA community, which is an oversight in terms of gender-based identification and violence. Transgender people are one of the LGBTQA communities that have faced significant discrimination. Transgender people, according to the [American Psychological Association \(2015\)](#), are people who struggle with the gender identity they were given at birth and the social identity they developed as they grew up. They transitioned between the binary gender identities accepted by society. Challenging the norms they received during birth, transgender people accepted the gender identity they felt psychologically and gradually expressed their social identity through behaviour, clothing, hairstyles, and voice or body characteristics. [Clark et al. \(2018\)](#) discovered a wealth of information about societal attitudes toward transgender people in their study on global attitudes toward transgender people. Though the world is moving toward accepting transgender people, the majority of countries are still struggling with cultural recognition of this community. The attitude of considering transgender people as having a mental illness while at the same time holding the reverent belief that they have some spiritual power is contrary to their identity. This dualism has a selective acceptance for them by society. In the context of India, while women struggle with their secondary identity in a patriarchal society, the transgender community faces a long-term challenge of gaining recognition.

Transgender people have a long history in India, both in social and cultural contexts ([Michelraj 2015](#); [Kalra 2012](#)). Usually, they were identified as “Hijra”, “Aravanis”, and “Kothis” in various parts of India. They usually stay with their community, separated from mainstream society. Transgender people have a significant role in Indian culture from a ceremonial perspective. They were usually invited to birth celebrations, marriage ceremonies, and other similar events to bless the baby or newlyweds. But inconsistent with [Chatterjee \(2018\)](#), it can be contemplated that, despite their long history in the culture, society still treats them like others that are not part of conventional society.

Despite their presence in Indian culture, transgender women went through drastic changes concerning acceptance in a changing society. [Lakkimsetti \(2022\)](#) presented the momentous progress of the gender nonconforming community in terms of legal and social acceptance. [Elischberger et al. \(2018\)](#) compared the acceptance of transgender youth in India and the United States. There was a relatively positive attitude towards transgender people in the USA compared to India, where it was relatively easier to come out with a sexual identity. However, Indian society is in the process of normalising trans identities and gender fluidity; complete recognition is still a long way off. [Mount \(2022\)](#) explored the changing identity of trans women in working-class society, especially in a metropolis, such as Bangalore. According to the growing acceptance of transgender people in Western society, the urban society in India has also shown similar behaviours. Trans women in urban India are no longer accepting of themselves in the traditional role of “Hijra” and are more comfortable coming out as transgender people. However, whether the situation is similar in semi-urban and rural areas remains to be seen. In semi-urban and rural India, where cultural orthodoxy still prevails in societal perception, the identity of transgender people is stigmatised based on the prejudiced perception people have of them. [Jena \(2019\)](#), [Pattnaik and Mohanty \(2014\)](#) presented the situation of transgender people in the context of Odisha. Just like the situation in the rest of India, transgender people in Odisha suffer similar discrimination in terms of social, economic, and health sectors. The government of Odisha has launched a “Sweekruti” scheme for the upliftment of the transgender community, especially for their equality and justice, but the outreach of the scheme needs to be measured.

The above understanding brings up various questions related to the identity formation of transgender people. While still stigmatised from the perspective of India, what are the things that contribute to their social and cultural identity? Does our biased perception of them act as a hurdle for them to receive recognition in society? Does the stereotyping of their images in various ways also contribute to and separate them from the mainstream? Do

the laws and schemes reach out to them, or are they just an addition to the list of schemes and programs?

In the above context, the existing paper tries to explore the identity formation and discrimination faced by the transgender community in India. Furthermore, it tries to understand the construction of their identity through the theory of Othering proposed by Hegel. It also strives to assess the impacts of discrimination on their personal, social, and health prospects in the community and tries to evaluate the impact of the schemes implemented for them.

## 2. Transgender, Discrimination, and Identity Formation

In the process of socialising gender roles, specification is crucial. According to [Gagne et al. \(1997\)](#), we often acknowledge gender identity through the genital configuration, which completely neglects the psychological and sociological perspective of gender. Individuals who do not fit into any of these categories question socially prescribed ways of life and express concerns about cultural and structural social order. Regarding the very basis of identity formation, [Oyserman and Jame \(2011\)](#) put light on “possible selves”, which someone aspires to become. [Spears \(2011\)](#) and [Tajifel \(1982\)](#) continue to emphasise the importance of the group in identity formation in Social Identity Theory. The perception of the group plays a crucial role in moulding the social identity of the person. Though identity is very personal to the individual, it is still influenced by the social group to which the individual belongs. Seeking acceptance by the group helps in maintaining membership in that particular group. In such circumstances, the stigma and prejudice lurking in the group or community have a certain impact on identity formation.

In their studies related to self and others, [Hegel \(1977\)](#) and [De Beauvoir \(1997\)](#) proposed the concept of “Othering”, which explains the process of creating self and other. This creation could be based on gender or social differences, but the comparison of one community or person created the identity of others. There are possibilities for these comparisons, which might be the beliefs, values, or prejudices one community/person holds toward another. [Spivak \(1985\)](#) elucidated in the study of “Rani of Sirmur” that, as a consequence of various social differentiations, such as racism, sexism, classism, etc., a symbolic degradation was created for some specific communities that are lower in stratification. This degradation again contributes to the identity formation of those specific communities. Relating this to the transgender community, the stigma and prejudice created by the majority of society altogether leads to symbolic degradation, as well as the formation of identity. The name and symbol attached to them by others create the image they have, which they may or may not have consented to. [Jensen \(2011\)](#) contended that the theory of othering is also depicted in the binary line, where a person identifies with self and other, which is very similar to the gender binary concept. Both of the dichotomies neglect the existence of a third person in the context.

[Levitt and Ippolito \(2014\)](#), in their research on identity formation in the case of the transgender community, explained the concept of balancing the urge to stand true to themselves with expectations from society or the community. Meanwhile, the self also figures things out based on the information it has related to gender, its coping skills with the changes happening around it, and their consequences. [Pardo and Devor \(2017\)](#) explained it further by associating it with classical identity development. Unlike a non-transgender person, where the realisation of gender identity is usually confirmed during adolescence, in the case of a transgender or gender nonconforming person, this process is a bit longer. Accepting the changes is difficult on physical, psychological, and social levels. For them, it is a lifelong process of accepting their own gender identity while questioning social norms.

The [American Psychological Association \(2015\)](#) denotes transgender as an umbrella term that embraces gender-fluid identity. According to the [CDC \(2021\)](#), gender identity and sexual orientation are two different aspects that help in identifying the person under the umbrella of “transgender”. As they transition between sexual orientation and gender identity, they are called transgender. The umbrella includes cisgender, gender-queer,

transgender male, transgender female, intersex, drag kings and queens, etc. In other words, transgender includes all the gender-fluid identities that recognise different forms of the transitional phase. The present study focuses on transgender women, who undergo twofold discrimination, one as transgender and the other as women.

Magno et al. (2019) discussed in their paper how structured stigma, interpersonal stigma, and individual stigma induced long-term violence against transgender women. This influences identity formation at every level, along with their choice of occupation and health. Jefferson et al. (2013) discussed the impact of violence against transgender women on their mental health. According to Bradford et al. (2013) and *The Lancet Public Health* (2020), a transgender woman's differential identity leads to a lack of access to healthcare services. Nadal et al. (2014) explain the process of systematic discrimination that leads up to the restricted choice of occupation for transgender women. Their only option is to work as a sex worker, which is also a stigmatised profession. This study can be linked to the process of othering, which stigmatises them and, in turn, results in othering, which impacts their identity formation, as well as their social lives.

In the case of the Indian community, the situation of transgender women is still uncertain. They face constant discrimination for their sexual choices and for not falling under the binary structure decided by society. According to the research conducted by Chakrapani et al. (2017), the "transgender identity stigma" is much higher in the Indian context. According to Jose and Vinod (2014) and Thompson et al. (2019), the social identity induced by stigma has a negative impact on transgender women. They have been denied access by social institutions, such as family, community, and society. In the case of India, they were disowned by their family and social institutions, along with being constantly harassed by the community. According to the report Chakrapani, Hijras/Transgender Women in India: HIV, Human Rights, and Social Exclusion (Chakrapani 2010) and Loh (2018), the discrimination and stigmatisation transgender people faced in India led to their social exclusion in socio-cultural, economic, and political life. Because of the exclusion, they have few options for a living, such as begging or working as sex workers or in prostitution. As discussed by Acharya et al. (forthcoming), the discrimination leading to the hesitancy to access the public health care system in Western Odisha resulted in inaccessibility to the COVID-19 vaccine among transgender people. Jena (2019) conducted research on the transgender community in Odisha and concluded that the deep-rooted stigmatisation of the community leads to deprivation of housing, land, education, and employment, contributing to the socio-cultural exclusion of transgender women. As a result of those different government schemes introduced for them in terms of social welfare, they also failed to deliver the social security they promised. Kumar (2018) shed light on the welfare schemes for transgender people and their failure in implementation.

### 3. Methods and Methodology

The World Bank and the Odisha Higher Education Department collaboratively established the Center of Excellence on Regional Development and Tribal Studies. Covering a wide range of topics and issues in the Western Odisha region, one of the objectives is to explore the socioeconomic and cultural exclusion of vulnerable groups in the western part of Odisha. Keeping this as a background for this project, the current study is carried out among 45 transgender women of Sambalpur City, Western Odisha, focusing on their identity formation and its impact on social, economic, and cultural fronts. This empirical study tries to explore the efficiency and awareness of the welfare program, the Central and State Governments are currently running for transgender women.

The sample respondents were located through purposive and snowball sampling methods in the peripheral region of Sambalpur Municipal Corporation, Odisha, India. As transgender women prefer to stay among their community members and keep minimal contact with the general public due to stigmatisation, the researcher adopted the snowball sampling method to contact the respondents. To identify the transgender women in the study area, the researchers took the help of an M.Phil. student from the Department of

Anthropology, Sambalpur University, India Samir Ranjan Pal, who completed his dissertation on the topic of “A Study on the Health Status of Transgender in Sambalpur District, Odisha”. From his information, the researcher found an address where a group of transgender women resided. We first reached out to them and shared our purpose of contact. Among them, a respondent named “Sweetie” was able to connect with us and agreed to collaborate on the study. After a few rounds of communication, she helped further introduce us to the community. With the reference from Sweetie, we could reach out to further respondents, and each of them could help us find more transgender women in the community. Following the above process, the researcher was able to reach out to 45 sample respondents. The researchers conducted many rounds of qualitative interviews with the 45 transgender women participants with the help of semi-structured interview schedules during the months of April–May 2022. These women were mostly found in the city slums, either engaged in begging or running prostitution. The culture of the geographical province chosen for the study is semi-urban, indicating cultural backwardness in comparison to India’s metro and urban areas.

The present study is focused on three aspects, including the identity formation of these trans women, their socioeconomic and cultural lives, and the quality of the implementation of the welfare program conducted by the local government. The in-depth questions for these participants revolved around the above-mentioned objectives of the research. For proper understanding of identity formation and their experiences, the narratives of the sample were collected through voice recording.

Regarding the ethical issues, all the information collected for this study was collected with the consent of each research participant. The identities of all these participants were kept discreet, and names were changed, keeping in mind their choice of occupation and identity. Keeping the human subjects in mind for the research, the researcher followed the Declaration of Helsinki (DoH) by the [WMA \(2013\)](#) regarding ethical and safety procedures during interviewing of the transgender women, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. The researchers also obtained approval from the home institution’s Doctoral Review Board (DRB) and Institutional Review Board (IRB). The current study was approved by Sambalpur University Human Research Ethics Committee on 14.03.2022 (Approval No. 22/PGA dt: 14.03.2022).

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Concerning the socio-demographic profile of these selected participants, all of them are trans female, ranging in age from 25 to 35 years. The majority of them were school dropouts who fled their homes due to the violence and discrimination they faced in their respective families and peer groups because of their gender identities. In terms of their current social situation, they are staying with trans community members on the outskirts of Sambalpur. The runaway respondents are mostly from the nearby districts of Bargarh, Balangir, and Sonapur. In terms of the caste category of the respondents, 36% of them belong to the general category, 22% of them were other backward class (OBC), 31% of them were schedule caste (SC), and 11% of them were schedule tribe (ST). As all of them come from the western part of Odisha, they have a similar language and culture. Following their narrations, they prefer to stay with their community members in rented houses. While conducting this fieldwork, the researchers could manage many home visits of these participants. During those times, they observed a certain kind of hesitation on the part of the community, which identified itself as non-transgender, when talking about and recognising them. They could not understand whom the researchers were referring to unless particular terms, such as “maichia”<sup>1</sup> and “gandiya”<sup>2</sup>, which are derogatory, were used. During the initial interaction with the transgender community, they appear to be hesitant to provide information. For example, Sweetie, a 25-year-old transgender female, shared:

*“A lot of people, in the name of research, contact us and come to us, but despite it, there is no change in our situation. Answering the same questions again and again, makes us annoyed!”*

#### 4.2. Identity Formation and Discrimination

While steering up the fieldwork, the researcher could assess that the differential and stagnant attitude of the community at large somehow created a sense of disbelief among these transgender people. All 45 participants were separated from their families at the early age of adolescence. In total, 43 of them stated that the change in gender identity occurred between the ages of 10 and 15 years. That was the time they chose to not live with their family due to physical, verbal, and mental mistreatment. Because they ran away at a very young age, they could not continue their education. Some also stated that they faced constant discrimination at school, particularly from their classmates, because of their appearances and clothing choices, which led to their dropping out at the high school level. According to Mamta, a 32-year-old transgender female:

*“When I was in school, my classmates were constantly bullying me for my appearance and my choices. Even if I complained to my teacher, they were also nonresponsive. It was a constant struggle to go to school every day. So, when I left my place, I dropped out of school.”*

Due to a lack of proper education, these transgender women struggle to land a respectable job. Most of them were engaged in work such as beggary, sex work, and party dancing. Among all the sample participants, 39 were involved in begging, prostitution, or working as party dancers. According to them, though they want to pursue a real job, the obstacle of stigma and discrimination restricts them from applying anywhere. As explained by Juhi, a 27-year-old trans woman:

*“I completed my matriculation and could not continue it further. When I started living on my own, I thought of searching for some basic office jobs. Unfortunately, I never heard back from the places I applied, and those who called me expected sexual favours. Moreover, inside our trans community, there is not much inspiration from those who have done any proper jobs.”*

Since childhood, they have always been made to realise that there is something wrong with them that is not accepted by society. Segregation began with a desire to be distinct from the general population. As a result, transgender people were isolated from the larger community and accepted by people who shared their characteristics. As shared by Binita, a 35-year-old transgender female from the community:

*“Though I am still in contact with my family, I know they were never going to accept me in public. So, for me, my current family is the people I am living with because they accept me the way I am and we all have similar life experiences. Society never accepted us, though we live with them in rented places. For them, we are a disgrace. They call us by various names like ‘maichia’, ‘gandiya’, ‘chakka’ but never with the name we have identified with.”*

#### 4.3. Construction of Transgender Identity through the Theory of Othering

The researcher could locate a distinct fact during the research: the analogous life experiences have created a “we-feeling” among the transgender community and, hence, they identify more with this particular social group rather than the outside world. This community satisfies their need for acceptance and validation. As a result of this, they fail to identify with the rest of society and have started to look at it in terms of “us” and “them”. Calling them by names such as “maichia”, “gandiya”, and “chakka” is part of the symbolic degradation of the people, as represented in Box 1.

**Box 1.** Various names called out to the transgender and their meaning.

- **Maichia:** A defaming way of defining someone who behaves like a woman despite being a man.
- **Gandiya:** Identifying a man who has an inclination toward feminine behaviour, which is mostly represented in cowardly, soft, and weak ways.
- **Chakka:** A derogatory way of calling them out without any particular reason.
- **Half n Half:** A derogatory term for someone who is both male and female.
- **Gandi:** Similar to *gandiya* in meaning.

During the fieldwork, the researchers had a similar experience when they initially tried to locate the place where the transgender people were living. While being asked about the location of this transgender community, people of the other community could not respond properly. But, when the local terms for them, such as “*maichia*” (which is a kind of derogatory term), were mentioned, then only the community people were able to respond.

The people who were assigned identities contributed to a general understanding of the transgender community in the study area. The limitations they have for their livelihood were also contributing to their identity formation. On one hand, these third-gendered people are still not accepted by society at large, and the occupations they adopted were not respectable from the standpoint of mainstream people. Trans women also suffer from the nonacceptance of binary gender identity formation. They were neither recognised by women nor by men. As a narrative from Payal, a 30-year-old transgender woman:

*“We often struggle to access public places, which are defined for either men or women. We are not accepted at any of them and did not receive any special provisions for us. For example, standing in the queue at the hospital, we juggle between the queue for men and women as they constantly thrash.”*

In continuation of that, the theory of Othering is also represented in the line of binary, where a person identifies with themselves and others, which is quite similar to the gender binary concept. Trans women are excluded as a third gender in both of the dichotomies which neglect their existence.

#### 4.4. Impact of Discrimination on Personal, Social, and Health Prospects of Trans Women

All the symbolic representations related to the gender perspective, choice of livelihood, and living conditions of this transgender community have added to the stigmatised identity formation by society, which contributes to the situation of exclusion for trans women. They are recognised as “others” and left out of mainstream society. Symbolic violence and hate crimes are two of the most extreme forms of exclusion. According to [The New Indian Express \(2022\)](#), a transgender woman was brutally murdered near the Sambalpur city area, though the initial police report portrayed it as murder after the burglary, and the transgender community is sceptical that this was a hate crime against them. The community has serious concerns related to this, as their safety is in question. Relating to the incident, as shared by Shibani, a 25-year-old trans woman:

*“Incidents like this shook us to our core. We fear moving around because people have a sense of stigmatising our job and our identity. This resulted in a sense of hatred toward us. They feel that because of our gender identity, we corrupt other people, and it is kind of okay to show violence against us.”*

As observed in the fieldwork, the various forms of exclusion contributing to the identity formation of trans women also result in less involvement from their side at various community places. During the interviews, these trans women were asked about the frequency of accessibility in terms of movement to various places in the city, and it was observed that the majority of respondents always have some kind of hesitation in accessing the facilities in public places. This demonstrates the type of behaviour they learned from society, which causes them to be hesitant (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Frequency of experience of discrimination in different public places by transgender women (N = 45).

Public Places	Never	Often	Always
Marketplaces	2	26	17
Hospitals	3	8	34
Banks	7	13	25
Friend's house (who are not part of your community)	10	12	23
Temples	3	10	32
Public transportation	0	6	39
School/colleges	1	5	39
Amusement Places (parks, malls, cinema theatres)	8	10	27
Restaurants/Café	0	3	42

Trans women are hesitant to seek healthcare services because they face discrimination. As a consequence of their choice of occupation, trans women need to have regular health check-ups. But the hesitancy that developed due to discrimination created a barrier. Out of 45 respondents, 43 trans women said “yes” to feeling uncertain about going to the hospital each time they needed it. Malti, who is 34 years old and transgender, shared:

*“The staff present at the hospitals, have weird eyes on us, as if we are some kind of alien. Sometimes, they are hesitant to touch us for treatment. Also, it seems like they feel we are suffering because of the way we are born.”*

The structural discrimination and stigma attached to the transgender community are caused by the behaviour they receive from different parts of society. Trans women’s mental health is impacted by discrimination, harassment, and a lack of access to social institutions. This adds to the burden of their struggle, along with their different gender identities. Along with that, trans women specific to the Sambalpur region have a special place during the festival of Sital Sasthi<sup>3</sup>, where their presence in public places is normalised for a particular period. They have been called to events with respect and dignity. As described by Madhu, a 32-year-old transgender woman:

*“Sital Sasthi is the one festival where we get recognition and identification as transwomen accepted by society. We were able to move around the city and into different places without hesitation. Also, transwomen from various parts of Odisha join the festival, which gives us strength. I always look forward to that festival.”*

In terms of social life, the selective acceptance of trans women in Indian society contributes to their duality of identity. Not being able to fall under any binary category is creating a void where trans women constantly struggle. As a result of that, they separate themselves from society and confide in their group. Society perceives this behaviour in another way and marks them as “others”. In terms of support from the government, all 45 participants have their Addhar cards, and 29 of them avail themselves of the food security program. But, apart from that, they are neither aware of any special program, such as “Sweekruti”, for them, nor are they currently part of it.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Transgender people in India hold a dualistic perspective on their identity: in one way, they are considered a disgrace to society and, at the same time, they are reassembled with the “Ardhanarishwar”<sup>4</sup> version of the Hindu God Shiva<sup>5</sup>. This dualism co-exists in Indian society, where acceptance of both femininity and masculinity is present in the form of a sacred avatar but, contrary to that, at the same time, there is selective discrimination against the transgender community. The transgender community is one that carries the duality of gender in both femininity and masculinity. They have also been given derogatory names that are commonly used as slang for men who are not manly enough and are more associated with femininity. In the case of trans women, they are caught up in the binary



status of gender, which completely ignores the third gender, and suffer along with the secondary status of womanhood in Indian society.

The entire situation of trans women can be understood through the chain reaction set off by their gender identity. As they could not fit under the binary gender standard of society, they were discriminated against and excluded by their family. That led to running away from home to avoid harassment, which also led to dropping out of school, again because of harassment and nonacceptance. Because trans women could not complete their education, they are limited to a few livelihood options, such as begging, prostitution, or party dancing, out of which prostitution is the least acceptable in the eyes of society. As mentioned earlier, among the research participants, 39 are currently engaged in such livelihoods. This led to further discrimination and, as a consequence of their involvement in a profession such as prostitution or sex work, they face symbolic degradation. Working as a prostitute for money is viewed as a dishonourable act by society, and their association with such a profession has resulted in a negative portrayal of transgender women. Adding to that, mainstream society tagged them with various forms of verbal violence by labelling and calling them out as “*maichia*”, “*gandhiya*”, “*chakka*”, and creating an identity, which they may or may not have acknowledged. This, in general, fosters trans women’s sense of self and others. Society always regards them as others, and vice versa. Kumar (2018), in his article ‘We Were, Are, and Will Remain Discriminated Against: The Status of Transgender Persons in Odisha’, which is based on his research on the transgender community in Odisha, argued that, despite various modernisation efforts and government interventions in terms of giving recognition to them, transgender women suffer. Verbal or physical violence, whether symbolic or physical, creates a domino effect of social exclusion for them as a result of systematic discrimination. As a result of this systematic discrimination, the majority of trans women showed hesitancy in accessing public places, such as schools, hospitals, markets, etc.

Despite the progressive acceptance of LGBTQAI across the world, and especially in Western culture, in contemporary times, in India, where the culture is diversified into urban, semi-urban, and rural areas, the acceptance is completely different. As practised in Indian culture, it is found that, although transgender women are required during birth events and marriage for blessing purposes, the same community is still discriminated against and excluded based on their gender expression and choice of profession. According to Madhu, a 34-year-old transgender woman:

*“We are desirable during the festivals of Sital Sasthi, birth ceremonies, and marriages, but apart from that, whenever people found us in public places in Sambalpur apart from such events, they reacted to us with an expression of disgrace. As if our presence pollutes the environment.”*

Apart from acceptance in festivities and ceremonies, the presence of transgender women in other social events is less likely. As discussed by Wrońska-Zaremba (2016), the muxes in Mexico have a similar condition in terms of receiving acceptance in the local society. They possess a higher status in their small community compared to the wider society, where they face discrimination. Like the previous various narratives shared by the respondents, it is evident that trans women are facing discrimination due to their gender identity and expression from personal, social, and health perspectives in the semi-urban space. This deep-rooted discrimination fuels further stigmatisation and nonacceptance by mainstream society. This also limited their ability to publicly express their sexuality. The irony is that, though they live among us, they are not part of us. The community’s selective acceptance of them at certain events is there only to fulfil the cultural significance and beliefs attached to them. Paradoxically, the cultural significance attached to a sacred avatar, along with the festivals and ceremonies mentioned earlier, is not enough to alter people’s perceptions, leading to the exclusion of transgender women. According to Rout (2018), the situation of transgender people in Odisha, India, is dreadful. They struggle with everyday requirements. Nonacceptance leads to a limitation of resources for them. Their access to basic necessities, such as education, employment, health care, and so on, is

extremely limited. To support the preceding argument, the researchers discovered various narratives depicting the bleakness of the discrimination they faced. Because of it, they choose based on the choices provided to them, for example, working as prostitutes or sex workers, which leads to the further degradation of their social status. In short, transgender people are caught up in the vicious cycle of stigmatisation and discrimination.

In terms of the legal and civil assistance required, they were somehow surviving in a bleak world. According to [National Human Rights Commission \(2017\)](#) and [Jaddidi and Sharma \(2021\)](#), laws exist to protect the transgender community, and a few state governments have started a few welfare programmes to help them. However, these programmes were unable to achieve their objectives due to people's sexual rigidity. Despite the decriminalisation of article 377 and the Supreme Court's recognition of "third gender" as a citizen identity for the LGBTQAI community through the NALSA decision, a shift in societal mindset is unlikely. The underlying judgmental attitude of society always questions their sexuality. Despite the growing acceptance of the trans community in the Western world and in a few areas of urban India, semi-urban and rural India are still behind. The new generation of educated masses is tolerant towards the acceptability of the LGBTQAI community but, due to a lack of education and an unprogressive mindset, semi-urban and rural India still consider them a disgrace. Fundamentalist thought is still prevalent in rural India, where it accounts for 70% of the population, and, as a result, society has become less accepting of transgender women. They faced multiple forms of discrimination, forcing them to make difficult decisions, such as social exclusion in the rural community or fleeing or entering the sex work profession. As sexuality can be understood as fluid and should be a personal choice, society always goes with the rigidity of the sexual binary. Despite their relevance to Ardhanarishwar's terrified nature, society forced them to choose between femininity and masculinity, completely rejecting the existence of a third gender. As a result, discrimination against the community began, which resulted in othering. Moreover, this mindset is non-contributory to the inclusion of transgender people and fuels their social exclusion.

Until the mental perception of the general public changes, the situation of identity formation for transwomen remains in the loop of self and others. Society will constantly create its identity based on the prejudices it has. To achieve community recognition, not only government policies, but also people's mindsets must be altered.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A derogatory term for someone who acts like a woman despite being a man.
- <sup>2</sup> Identifying a man who exhibits feminine tendencies, usually in a cowardly, soft, and weak manner.
- <sup>3</sup> Sital Sasthi is a festival to celebrate the holy union of Shiv and Parvati in the western part of Odisha. Transgender people are celebrated for their participation in festivals as followers of Shiva's half-man, half-woman avatar.
- <sup>4</sup> 'Ardhanarishwar' version of Shiva: out of many avatars of Shiv, Ardhanarishwar is the avatar, where the god embodied both genders in a single amalgamation. That represented both the male and female genders.
- <sup>5</sup> According to Hindu mythology, Shiva is part of the holy trinity that includes Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the protector), and Shiva (the destroyer).

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