

The Vital Contributions of NGOs in Assisting the Transgender Community during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The major impact of COVID-19 can be seen on marginalized communities, especially on transgender communities. They were facing unique hurdles at that time. Through this research, the researcher addresses the contribution of NGOs to the transgender community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the authors of the research papers focused on the challenges faced by the transgender community during the pandemic. Still, there is limited information related to the role of NGOs in facilitating basic things for transgender individuals during the pandemic. This study seeks to bridge this gap by researching through case studies in which NGOs have supported transgender individuals during the pandemic.

Keywords: NGO, COVID-19, Transgender, Pandemic, Marginalized Communities.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has put the health of a massive population of 1.3 billion Indians at risk. The measures implemented by the Indian government to control the pandemic have created challenges for marginalized communities (Dasgupta et al., 2021). They had experienced high social and structural inequalities during the pandemic. (DeMulder et al., 2020; Dubey et al., 2020). Especially transgender communities, one of the most deprived communities in India (Chatterjee et al., 2020). Before the pandemic, they faced various difficulties like food insecurity, lack of property, and poverty. During the pandemic, their mental health and overall well-being were also exacerbated (Salerno et al., 2020; Sevelius et al., 2020; Sandya et al., 2022). They even encountered more challenges in accessing healthcare services compared to cisgender individuals. As a result, the vulnerability related to health risks was heightened during the pandemic, which led to the rising mental health disorders and suicidal tendencies (Woulfe & Wald, 2020; Sachdeva et al., 2020; Chatterjee et al., 2020; Banerjee & Nair, 2020; Shetty et al., 2020; Dasgupta et al., 2021). For example, gender-affirming treatments were delayed, which had a highly negative impact on the mental health of transgender individuals due to clinic shutdowns (Sevelius et al., 2020).

Many governmental and non-governmental organizations played a significant role in providing relief and support to those affected by the pandemic. For instance, some northern states' governments provided relief funds to those facing difficulties during the pandemic. Government organizations and non-governmental organizations nationwide are actively engaged in providing facilities to the marginalized communities. They distributed essential items like food, medications, and personal care products,

especially during lockdowns (Balaji, 2020). Rashtriya Sewa Bharti did nationwide initiatives to deliver food supplies to seven million families, distribute food packets to 45 million individuals, and donate nine million masks and 60000 units of blood (Challagalla, 1 July 2021). Similarly, the New Delhi-based Hemkunt Foundation distributed 360 tons of meals to migrant laborers. During the second COVID-19 wave, they facilitated oxygen, medicines, and hospital beds for those in dire need (Challagalla, 1 July 2021).

These days, NGOs' role in supporting marginalized communities is increasing. Through this research, the researcher addresses the contribution of NGOs to the transgender community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the authors of the research papers focused on the challenges faced by the transgender community during the pandemic. Still, there is limited information related to the role of NGOs in facilitating basic things for transgender individuals during the pandemic. This study seeks to bridge this gap by researching through case studies in which NGOs have supported transgender individuals during the pandemic.

Method

To describe the different roles NGOs play in supporting transgender community throughout the pandemic is an explorative research approach followed in this article. The type of research paper is qualitative and based on which purposive sampling was used where semi-structured interviews were performed with transgender, and these can be used as a means through which the respondent's in-depth understanding of a role NGOs contribute to the enhancement of resilience the transgender community feels and the exceptional challenges they find themselves in facing.

Participants and Recruitment Process

Using purposive sampling, ten case studies were taken from Delhi (Hancock et al., 2001). The participants were over 18 and lived in Delhi for four years. These transgender individuals received support from NGOs during the pandemic. After obtaining their consent to conduct interviews, the participants were interviewed for 50 to 90 minutes.

Research Instruments

The research interview process involved 22 questions that were grouped into five themes. The first theme, Economic Hardship and Income Loss, discussed the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihoods and stability of work of the participants. The second theme is Health Related Concerns, which examines challenges faced in accessing medication and vaccinations during the pandemic. The third theme, Stigmatization and Discrimination, determines the discrimination faced by participants from family, local communities, and healthcare providers. *Resilience and Adaptability*, the fourth theme discussed, is related to the coping mechanism used by participants to deal with the challenges they faced during the pandemic. Finally, the fifth theme, *the role of NGOs*, explores the role of NGOs in providing facilities and interventions to support this community during the pandemic.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Hindi with transgender participants living in Delhi. The interviews were later translated into English for transcription, which helped in conducting an in-depth analysis without losing the authenticity of the narratives. This method sought to understand the complex issues encountered by transgender people during the pandemic.

Ethical Considerations

Before interviews, each participant gave consent and participated voluntarily in this study. Fundamental ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity were maintained during each research stage. The names of the participants were pseudonyms to protect their privacy and dignity.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method identified themes, patterns, and valuable insights into the role of NGOs in facilitating the transgender community during the pandemic. (Poteat et al., 2020).

Results

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the study's participants

Sample Characteristics	F (%)
Gender identity	
Male to Female	6 (60%)
Intersex	4(40%)
Religion	
Hindu	8(80%)
Muslim	2(20%)
Education	
Illiterate	3(30%)
Primary(up to 8 th standard)	4(40%)
Secondary	2(20%)
Senior Secondary	1(10%)
Average income(monthly) before COVID-19	11,400
Average income(monthly)during COVID-19	5,450
Have you been vaccinated against COVID-19?	
Yes	8(80%)
No	2(20%)
Do you have an Aadhaar card?	
Yes	6(60%)
No	4(40%)

Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. In this sample, 60% are male-to-female individuals, and the others are intersex(40%). One-fourth of the sample did not receive vaccination during the pandemic. This study found that most gained education up to the 8th standard (40%), 30% were illiterate, 20% of the respondents passed secondary standard, while 10% of the sample had passed senior secondary. Other information related to religion, Aadhaar card, and monthly income-related details is provided in Table 1.

Economic Hardship and Income Loss

During the pandemic, most of the transgender individuals(n=9) who were involved in begging faced income-related challenges. Also, one of the transgender individuals switched her profession from begging to sex work to earn a living. This is summarized in the following statements:

Nidhi, 30, said, "During the pandemic, everything changed significantly. Everything was closed, and the streets were empty. On the highway, there were few people and cars around. Because of this, it was hard for us to get back on the road. If a car stopped at a red light, the driver still did not open their window because they feared catching the virus.

Neha, 40, said, "The COVID-19 phases were the real struggle periods in my life. The pandemic made it impossible for me to go and beg for money outside. This became very hard for me."

Manisha, 25, said, "When the lockdown was announced, I had only 10 rupees and shifted to a new place. I felt fear. How could I survive?"

At 33 years old, Ritika mentioned, "Tol Badhai had been closed. We were facing financial difficulties due to a lack of savings, and we could not go outside or do anything due to the lockdown."

Income loss was common among many transgender individuals (n=9) during the pandemic due to lockdown. The lack of financial savings exacerbated their difficulties during that time. For example, Shivani, 21, mentioned, "Without any source of income, I faced challenges managing my day-to-day expenses and could not pay the rent.

Another transgender person, n=1, reported the issues she faced regarding her hormone treatment. Nisha, 28, discussed the obstacles to accessing medicines and the financial difficulties during the pandemic.

Health-Related Concerns

During the pandemic, many transgender individuals faced difficulties related to getting medication. As Nisha, 28 years old transwoman said "She encountered difficulties to get hormone therapy because of the lack of transportation services. As she mentioned that she did not access hormone therapy-related medicines at nearby medical stores, I did not have enough money to book a cab to travel to get medications from another medical store. Similarly, Shivani, 21 years old transwoman told that during the pandemic, when she ran out of HIV-AIDS medication. She asked at the nearby store, but the store ran out, and she didn't have enough money to take a private car to another pharmacy."

Manisha, 25, said, "I preferred not to go to the hospitals because private hospitals were expensive, government hospitals had long procedures, and we had to wait in line with other people, which made us uncomfortable."

Additionally, Nidhi, 30 years old, said: I did not get any vaccinations during the pandemic because many people were roaming our street to give us vaccinations, but I did not get them. I heard that these people mixed poison in the vaccine and gave it to us. Because they knew if we died, no one cared about us, or how we died.

Many transgender individuals (n=6) reported no major health issues during the pandemic. They considered themselves healthy. At 41, Sonika said, "Luckily, I did not face any major health-related issues during COVID-19. I was healthy during the pandemic."

Four transgender individuals mentioned that they were facing mental health issues like anxiety and depression because of a shortage of money. As Pooja, 38 years old transwoman said "I had always headache to think how to survive during the pandemic without cash. That time was very stressful for me. I was always thinking about money, which led to anxiety and headaches.

Shivani, 21, said, "I was tense about my health and money during the pandemic. I felt stuck and did not know how to deal with that. Due to the lockdown, I was not able to go outside and stayed alone at home, leading to stress and anxiety.

Stigmatization and Discrimination

Many transgender individuals shared their experiences of facing stigma and discrimination during the pandemic. As Nisha, 28, stated, "During the pandemic, when we took the bus, people felt that we would beg". This stigma created hesitation among the people towards them. Another person said, "Many drivers hesitated to open their car windows to beg us. Because they thought that we might spread the virus to them. (Manisha, 25 years old)

A few said this kind of discrimination was nothing new to them. The rejection starts when they reveal their identity to their families.

When queried about the stigmatization and discrimination they faced, several individuals shared instances of encountering discrimination while begging for money during the pandemic. One participant emphasized the impact of the fear of COVID-19, stating, "If we are talking about the pandemic, when we took buses during the pandemic, people felt fear that we were forced to beg." (Nisha, 28 years old)

This fear was pervasive, affecting interactions with others. "Many drivers were hesitant to open car windows to give support, apprehensive about potential virus exposure through close contact". (Manisha, 25 years old)

For a subset of transgender individuals (n=3), this experience was not unfamiliar, as they had previously faced stigmatization and discrimination when disclosing their gender identity. Another participant shared a broader perspective on societal exclusion, narrating an incident at a mall: "One more thing, like I am an educated transgender. If I go to a mall for shopping, first I am stopped at the gate by a guard, who denies me entry into the mall, saying there is nothing for me. It is also social exclusion; we go to the mall for purchases, but they think we can go only for begging." (Neha, 40 years old)

Additionally, one transgender individual highlighted the internalized stigma within their community, expressing, "Our community is already self-stigmatized. If we see a crowd, we feel fear, like, 'How could we do treatment in front of all these people? No one would misbehave with us. We are transgender, and we do not have much confidence. We are full of stigma; when we travel on the metro, we think that it is full of lots of people, and I am the only transgender person here. We feel derogatory when people look at us." (Sonika, 41 years old)

Resilience and Adaptability

When asked about their resilience and adaptability, most participants spent their quality time on mobile devices. For instance, Nisha, a 28-year-old girl, shared that I spent most of my time watching YouTube for learning new dishes and talking with friends on the phone, which helped me divert my mind from the challenges.

Manisha also shared that she preferred to talk with her friends because it helped her realize she was not the only one facing difficulties during the pandemic. Similarly, the other two participants also mentioned comfort in their community.

In coping with financial difficulties, three transgender individuals took loans from moneylenders so that they could bear the basic expenses and the rent. Monika said, "I had to take a loan from a lender to survive during the pandemic." On the other hand, some transgender individuals preferred to work during the pandemic to make ends meet and survive. For instance, Nidhi, a 30-year-old, said, "I went to work where police were not present and I could easily beg during lockdown to make ends meet."

Role of NGOs

NGOs played a significant role in supporting transgender individuals in many ways during the pandemic. They organized a camp to provide vaccinations. As Ritika mentioned, "I got vaccinated from a local NGO. They organized a camp in my colony to provide free vaccinations to transgender individuals."

A few transgender individuals mentioned that they also got financial support. Nidhi noted that she got free HIV/AIDS medication from the organization, and also the organization paid the charges of an auto rickshaw to reach the hospital. This support was significant for me during that difficult time." Pooja, 28 years old, mentioned that she got 500 rupees in her account from the government, but it was insufficient to survive. While a few organizations like Humsafar Trust and Global Fund sent 1500 rupees to our accounts and distributed kits.

Many transgender individuals received rations from NGOs. For example, Asha said, "I got the ration from the NGOs during the pandemic." Even NGOs distributed essential items like food kits, sanitizers, and masks to the transgender community. The AIDS Control Society provided online therapy and helpline numbers for transgender individuals in Delhi. One of the participants mentioned that she received online anti-retroviral treatment (ART).

Discussion

The research paper highlights the challenges faced by transgender individuals during the pandemic and the role of NGOs in providing support to them. Transgender individuals in the study already encountered financial insecurity, health-related problems, and discrimination during the pandemic. The support provided by NGOs played a crucial role in dealing with the challenges faced by transgender individuals during this challenging period. Despite the limited sample size, the study sheds light on the obstacles encompassed by income loss, debt, and encountered difficulties related to getting medications like hormone therapy and HIV/ AIDS treatment, facing discrimination while begging, and demonstrating resilience by spending time with their community members and using smartphones for learning. During the pandemic, NGOs provided online therapy, financial help, and distributed rations among transgender individuals.

The situation faced by transgender individuals during the pandemic.

At the beginning of the pandemic, there was a misconception that COVID-19 affected everyone equally, but the situation for transgender individuals was worse than that of others. Many of them lost their income sources, especially those who were engaged in *tolbadhai*, sex work, and begging; however, they had to resort to loans with high interest from private moneylenders. Furthermore, most of them lived in congested places and shared common bathrooms, which made it difficult for them to maintain hygiene. They did not have health insurance and lacked family support (Woulfe & Wald, 2020; Poteat et al., 2020; Chatterjee et al., 2020; Sevelius et al., 2020; Fish et al., 2020; Dasgupta, Sinha & Roy, 2021; Santos et al., 2021; Pandya & Redcay, 2021). According to Kalra (2012) and Pandya & Redcay (2022), those transgender individuals who were involved in sex work during the pandemic were at high risk of HIV.

Many studies also show that social isolation hurts the mental health of individuals. Moreover, transgender individuals faced abuse from their partners and family members during the pandemic. As a

result, they were at a higher risk of violence, abuse, and exacerbated mental health challenges. (Banerjee & Nair, 2020; Poteat et al., 2020).

Transgender individuals faced difficulties in accessing gender affirming care, which led to various health-related issues during the pandemic. This situation was particularly problematic for those who had initiated gender-affirming care before the pandemic but were unable to complete their procedures (Van Der Miesen et al., 2020; Kidd et al., 2021). Furthermore, those transgender individuals who had started hormone therapy, in which the use of androgens had an increased risk of COVID-19 infection (Sachdeva et al., 2021).

Support from NGOs during the Pandemic

The NGO mainly focuses on providing services and advocacy to marginalized communities, such as transgender individuals. The primary focus of NGOs is education, health, and livelihood interventions. As Banks & Hulme (2012) and As Makoba (2002) points out, NGOs are very impactful agents in society, delivering justice and equality to marginalized communities.

According to Asogwa et al. (2023), NGOs played a significant role during the pandemic by providing virtual meetings with the people and implementing their programs in this crisis. Sevelius et al. (2020) highlighted how efficiently NGOs worked during this crisis by giving rations and facilitating online consultations. Moreover, they offered online consultations for transgender individuals affected by HIV and reduction techniques for substance abuse during the pandemic (Banerjee & Rao, 2021).

The NGOs played a significant role by providing funds to small organizations working directly with transgender individuals at the grassroots level. They distributed free masks, financial help, and also created health awareness by using social media, and shared emergency contact numbers with marginalized communities (Banerjee & Nair, 2020; Chatterjee et al., 2020; Poteat et al., 2020; Waulfe & Wald, 2020).

Limitations of the Study

This study focused on transwomen and intersex individuals only. The limitation of the study is that the sample size was minimal; it does not generalize the situation to the whole community.

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