

Basic Medical Facility For Transgenders – A Crucial Step Towards Improving Public Health

The preamble to the Constitution of India speaks about Equality in status and opportunity for all, the constitution also screams Right to life as one of the fundamental rights in Article 21, wherein the Right to Healthcare is an integral part. Hypothetically...So far so good...BUT...what about reality??

What about Saikat, a transgender who had a train accident and died since the hospital could not decide whether to treat Saikat in the male ward or the female ward? And what about the likes of Tanushri, a transsexual, a victim of gang rape during her field work days in an NGO when the doctor refused to examine her and treat her or even suggest the necessary PEP drug that could check HIV infection if administered within 24 – 36 hrs of the sad incident? And what about the hundreds of instances taking place every day where thousands of individuals face discrimination, harassment, ridicule, rejection and even exploitation at the hands of health service providers just because they belong to the sexual minority group who do not and most importantly, cannot fit into the society defined two rigid boxes defining who is 'male' and 'female'.

Moreover, to break a common myth that people have, this is just not 'their' fight that they need to undertake but 'our' fight too since lack of adequate medical care for any segment of the population directly affects the health condition of the society as a whole. In case of India, this is all the more true against the backdrop of rampant rise in Sexually Transmitted Diseases including HIV / AIDS, etc. Due to the discrimination and harassment experienced in hospitals and nursing homes, individuals belonging to sexually minority groups seldom visit doctors and though the general mainstream population likes to believe that the transgendered population is an alienated group but in reality it is not since the major chunk of population who engage with the transgendered population happen to be from amidst us, our own friends, brothers, uncles colleagues, etc. The alarming spread of HIV / AIDS in India are mostly due to the large apathy of the system towards such minority groups.

Moving from the legal to the humane, perhaps one of the basic needs of mankind is to be looked after and treated in times of sickness. And it is with this simple understanding that Civilian Welfare Foundation (CWF), a city based NGO consisting of young and enthusiastic social workers who pledge to stand up against anything unjustified, undignified and corrupt that punctuates the growth of a city, nation or mankind ventured out to assess the medical and health problems faced by the transgendered population of the city including transgenders, transsexuals, hijdas and kothis with a plan to provide a basic healthcare clinic having doctors, testing facilities and free basic medicines and most importantly a knowledgeable and understanding environment where a transgender can walk in during illness without having to face any discrimination.

CWF engaged with numerous transgenders, transsexuals, hijdas and kothis from NGO's such as Pratyay Gender Trust, People Like Us (PLUS), Amitie Trust, etc in order to assess the kind and magnitude of healthcare discrimination that they have to face everyday.

The two main dimensions of health requiring intervention that came up from these discussions included psychological health and physical health of transgendered individuals.

1. Psychological Health of Transgendered individuals:

Transgenders are individuals whose biological sex assigned at birth do not match with their gender identity (what gender they think themselves to be) of self. Unlike gays, bisexuals and lesbians, who are physically / romantically attracted to same / both sexes and are more about the 'preference' issue that arises during adolescence, transgendered individuals face the 'identity' issue right from when they develop self identity during early childhood. In other words, sexual orientation is about 'Who I like' while Gender Identity is about 'Who I am'...hence more fundamental...and more serious.

Transsexuals again are transgenders who go through surgery to change their bodies in order to assign to the gender to which they internally identify with. Thus Transmen are 'Female to Male' transsexuals while transwoman are 'male to female' transsexuals respectively.

Little boys who start behaving and acting like girls and expressing interest in dolls, household work, make up, jewelry, singing and dancing, needless to say are thought to be diseased or mentally unstable, and are ridiculed and harassed at home, school and neighborhood by everyone including family and friends. Naturally they suffer from acute depression, feel suicidal and ultimately are forced to leave school, home and locality.

“My parents took a lot of trouble to cure me at first, showed me to various doctors, took me to vellore as well” says Sourabbh Das, a transgender at Amitie Trust. *“Even doctors in Vellore did not know about transgenderism and I was given electric shocks and even put in an asylum to be cured. Now my mother understands that this is not abnormal or a disease, and she participates in workshops to understand it more .*

In the words of Sohini, a beautiful transwoman *“My father who was a teacher, never understood who I am or what I was all about. Since the time my mother was ill I had taken up all responsibilities of home and looked after my two little sisters who were much younger than me. But father never understood or accepted and finally asked me to leave...to stay away since my being like this would create problems for my sister’s marriage later. To create problems for my sisters is the last thing that I want so I left home and don’t keep in touch. All of us suffer from bouts of depression because all of us have faced rejection from loved ones for who we are and struggle each and every second of our existence. Starting from when we wake up in the morning, go out to work, walk on the streets, come back, we are ridiculed and laughed at and every second is a fight. Even when we come back at night and stand in front of the mirror, then also it’s a fight with ourselves coz the mirror shows a body which we do not feel as ours..it is not who we are from inside.”*

2. Physical Health of Transgendered individuals:

Physical Health of transgendered individuals is the dimension where all the discrimination takes place. Physical health can be talked about from two perspectives – the common health problems and health issues specifically related to transgenders.

a) Common health problems: Common health problems include cold, cough, loose motion, diseases like malaria, jaundice, typhoid, etc that can happen to

anybody. For transgendered individuals walking inside a medical facility and getting to the doctor is a struggle leave alone being treated properly.

“ The doctor comes much later, all the staff including the nurses, the ward boys, attendants, even the security laughs at us, points a finger at us and makes derogatory comments. We are human beings, we also have self respect. Would you be able to stand such an environment? Would you be able to wait there even if you were allowed entry?” asks Bhanupriya, a transgender who works in the shelter home ‘Prothoma under the NGO PLUS.

In the words of Tanushri, yet another beautiful transwoman who’s also a wonderful singer *“Doctors are considered second to god, people who give other human beings the gift of health. But for us, doctors also discriminate. They do not want to examine us, or asks us to come in the wee hours of morning or late night so that other patients do not object. There are doctors who unnecessarily examine our private parts even when it is not necessary and asks demeaning questions and make derogatory remarks on the same. I had diarrhea once and the doctor made comments related to my anus and my sexual practices then. When I was gang raped, the doctor there did not even examine me, didn’t even suggest the anti HIV infection PEP Drug that I should have taken within 24 hrs to combat infection if any. Usually doctors do not want to see us and even if they do they just prescribe sleeping pills and the like for any disorder to get rid of us from their premises.”*

Sourabh says “I was wrongly treated for epilepsy for a long time” while Konkona says “Transgenders are not admitted in the female ward, nor can they go to the male ward, and in this confusion regarding which ward to put into, many a times the treatment never takes place in the proper time”

b) Specific Health issues: Specific Health concerns and medical care that transgendered individuals need are mostly related to their hormone therapy in case of SRS (Sex Reassignment Surgery) and STD (Sexually Transmitted Diseases).

Jaya, a strong and confident transwoman in Amitie Trust exclaims *“Doctors don’t even know the difference between transgendered and transsexuals, leave alone treating them for their specific medical issues! They are doctors, they are supposed to be knowledgeable and educated about these differences! They cannot be shrouded in ignorance and discriminate like this. We are also human beings who require medical care! All social subjects and medical curriculum should consist of at least one or two chapters elaborating the concept of gender and sexuality of human beings. “*

Sohini, Jaya, Tanushri, Bhanupriya, mausam and almost all of them said that they had taken pills and other hormone injections to develop feminine characteristics just on the basis of word of mouth. According to Jaya “No, we have never been guided by any endocrinologist. Who will we go to? Who will tell us? We just hear from our friends and take them.”

Deshopriyo from Amitie Trust says “While castration is totally illegal in India, SRS does not have any proper guidelines. It is not clearly stated anywhere whether it is legal or not and there exist no proper guidelines regarding the same. What happens is that all the transgenders go to quacks for the surgery which results in high chances of serious infections, severe side effects and even death sometimes”

Sumona from Prothoma says “With so much discrimination and harassment why would any transgender go to undertake the HIV / AIDS test once in every 3 months? Most of us do not do it. In fact for people who are positive, the magnitude of indifference and lack of care and treatment that they experience from the system make them indifferent towards the society as a whole and that is quite understandable. After such neglect, why would they care about using protection and not spreading the infection to the society which shuns them as objects of ridicule and does not even consider them human?”

Konkona, Piyali and Deshopriyo, office bearers of Amitie states that only with extensive sensitization programmes for doctors and all support staffs and increased platforms for expression of who we are and our problems to the mainstream society can this large gaping unfair divide be bridged. Till then, a separate medical clinic having supportive environment and sensitized staff with basic medical facilities is the best way forward.”

Summary: Why Transgendered people need focused medical intervention:

- **Lack of Awareness:** Lack of awareness and knowledge of doctors about transgenders and transsexuals, the difference between them, their conditions, needs, specific health related issues, etc leading to not only prolonged illness, but harassment, trauma and depression for such population and reduction in the health condition (Both physical and psychological) of the society as a whole.

- **Lack of Proper Treatment:** Lack of knowledge and severe emotional rigidity of doctors coupled with societal pressures created by the mainstream population present in the hospitals / clinics lead to complete rejection or providing wrong treatment to transgendered population for even basic and common health related problems. Moreover, specific health requirements for transgendered population such as related to SRS, hormonal courses, STD's, etc remain largely unmet thereby affecting the entire society's health as a whole.
- **Discrimination:** Ridicule, exploitation and rejection at every step for transgendered people at hospitals, nursing homes, doctor's chambers, clinics, etc by both doctors and other staff including attendants, ward boys, nurses, security, etc coupled with rejection to provide necessary health service even in times of emergency such as accidents or rape are rampant.
- **Exploitation:** Harassment and exploitation at the hands of doctors who focus excessively on private parts of transgendered people even when it is not required. These include – Forced examination of private parts, forced touching and feeling, asking demeaning questions and ridiculing.
- **Infrastructural Problems:** Infrastructural problems such as lack of a separate ward for individuals who do not fit into the mainstream society defined male-female boxes lead to rejection in hospital admissions, delay in health services, harassment and discrimination for transgendered people.
- **Lack of Basic Medical Treatment:** Whatever might be the aforesaid reasons like lack of awareness, exploitations etc medical treatment should be same for all irrespective of class/caste/gender. Transgenders are being devoid of basic medical treatment , period !

All these problems if not addressed properly will actually aggravate different deadly diseases like AIDS and other STDs which is increasing day by day in Indian Subcontinent.

With a view to all the above, a separate medical clinic having basic amenities such as knowledgeable and understanding doctors and staff, basic testing facilities and medicines for the sexual minority groups is a must.

In this regard, Civilian Welfare Foundation (CWF), a group of young enthusiastic activists who believe in Anything and everything for JUSTICE and anything and everything for the RIGHT CAUSE is working with all the sexual minority groups of the city and other organizations to create such a separate basic medical facility for transgenders and transsexuals, having a supportive environment where there would be doctors who know and understand the health issues and needs of this population both in physical and psychological terms coupled with other testing and medicine facilities so that this population can access adequate health services like everyone else...

...simply because at the end of the day we are all human beings who need to be taken care of when we are sick.

This is the first part of the research based in the basic health care of transgender individuals. This research has been conducted by Shuvojit Moulik, Indrani Kar and Sutanuka Gupta. The above compilation has been done by Shuvojit Moulik.