

Threat of Sexually Transmitted Diseases Among Transgender Individuals: A Study in City Kolkata

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ABSTRACT

Background : Rate of Sexually Transmitted Diseases are high among Transgender individuals as compared to the rest of the population. Therefore this paper aims at studying the rate of sexually transmitted diseases among Transgender individuals and understanding the causes behind increasing rate of STDs among Transgender community in Kolkata.

Methodology: The study was completed based on an interview method which was conducted on 60 Transgender individuals from Kolkata city.

Result: As per the result, approximately 57% of Transgender individuals are suffering from sexually transmitted diseases. Rejection by society, educational and employment deprivation has pushed them towards prostitution which is the major factor behind increased STD rate among Transgender community.

Conclusion: Till date Transgender individuals face discrimination and humiliation in our society. They have very poor access to medical and health care facilities which often leaves their diseases untreated. Hence, the first protective measure is to provide medical facilities to them. Secondly, they should be accepted in the society and encouraged to be educated and employed so that they are not abandoned to an extent where prostitution remains the only choice.

Key Words : Transgender community, Transgender health, Sexually transmitted diseases, Kolkata

INTRODUCTION

Transgender is a state where an individual's gender identity does not match with his or her birth-assigned sex. That is, the one who is born with a male body feels like a female and the one born with a female body feels like a male from within. In order to identify themselves with their gender identity they involve into activities like cross dressing, changing their names, getting sex reassignment surgery and hormonal therapy done or changing the status of sex in personal documents. Although each and every transgender individual can go for the Sex Reassignment Surgery and hormonal therapy, the steps involved in transition will vary from one transgender individual to another. Transgender individuals feel that they are born in the wrong body and do not fit into the usual definition of gender behavior of the society. Since our society accepts only two genders, masculine and feminine, the transgender individuals face discrimination and therefore strive for support from family and friends to assert their gender identity which they usually do not receive. It is the

responsibility of every social institution to help transgender community to step into the main stream society and fight against the social stigma, fear, social discrimination and shame. Even the education system has a major role to play, not only in providing a comfortable environment for the transgender students for continuing their education, but also educating and sensitizing rest of the students and teachers about transgender community so as to make them understand that they need our care, attention and acceptance. Transgender individuals are differently addressed in different regions such as Hijra, Aravani, Kinnar to name some. Even though they have thousands of names, none gives them the identity of a human being which they crave. Be it as a prostitute or as a beggar, whenever they get in touch with the main stream society, all they seek is acceptance. Transformation of transgender people has been legalized by many countries but still there are certain countries where physical transformation of them is not accepted. In India, transgender individuals were recognized by the Supreme Court as “third gender” on 15th April 2014. In the states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala sex reassignment surgery has been granted for free to the male-to-female transgender individuals in government hospitals.

Transgender and health :

In order to ascertain the gender identity, transgender people usually go for gender transition by taking hormones which may lead to serious side effects like liver damage, blood clots, blood pressure fluctuation etc. Cancer is another serious consequence which may get developed due to intake of hormones. Breast, liver, ovaries, uterus may get affected depending on the stage of transition. Majority of the transgender sex workers live in slum areas where the environment is highly unhygienic. This contributes more diseases to the already diseased community. Other than physical health, they also suffer from mental health issues as they struggle to connect their gender identity with their biological sex. They feel depressed, anxious and isolated as they are abandoned by the family, friends and society. They often become a victim of excessive drinking, smoking and drug abuse in order to fight with the stress and depression. As they are deprived of education and employment, they often end up with begging and prostitution. This increases their chances of attracting sexually transmitted diseases which may also affect the general population through them. Experts believe that transgender individuals need medical care as much as it is needed by non-transgender individuals. Now it is the responsibility of the policy makers, doctors, health care experts and the society in general to come forward and create an environment where the ailing transgender individuals may avail proper treatment without facing any fear of rejection and embarrassment.

Objectives of the study :

- To study the rate of sexually transmitted diseases among transgender individuals in Kolkata city.
- To study the causes behind increasing rate of sexually transmitted diseases among transgender individuals in Kolkata.

METHODOLOGY

Kolkata is the capital of the state West Bengal which had also been the capital of India during the British Raj. The city is well known for its rich culture, unique architecture and art galleries. The study was conducted in Kolkata city based on primary data. The researcher had collected data from 60 sample respondents using interview method. Convenience and snow ball sampling techniques

were used to reach the target group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sexually transmitted diseases among Transgender individuals in Kolkata :

Individuals of any sexual orientation may have health issues but transgender community is at a higher risk of having health problems in general and sexually transmitted diseases in particular because they hardly consult a health care provider. It happens as certain health care providers are insensitive towards the issues of transgender community. As a result, they are humiliated and face uncomfortable situations in the hospitals which become a barrier to receive quality treatment and services. Majority of the health care providers are uninformed and have limited training and knowledge regarding the unique needs of Transgender health. This leaves them with lack of access to medical treatment and unpleasant health care encounters.

Table 1 represents the various sexually transmitted diseases which the transgender individuals suffer from. It has been seen that 11.66% of them suffer from genital herpes, 15% suffer from Syphilis, 10% suffer from Gonorrhoea, 13.33% are a victim of Chlamydia and 6.66% do not wish to reveal the sexually transmitted disease they have. Therefore, as per the analysis, approximately 57% of transgender individuals do suffer from sexually transmitted diseases.

Table 1 : Rate of sexually transmitted diseases among transgender community in Kolkata		
Sexually transmitted diseases	Number of people suffering from the disease	Percentage (%)
Genital herpes	7	11.66
Syphilis	9	15
Gonorrhoea	6	10
Chlamydia	8	13.33
Unrevealed	4	6.66
Total	34	56.66

Source: Field Survey

Even though factors like anal sex, multiple sex partners, unprotected sex etc. are considered to be the reasons behind transgender individuals being affected by sexually transmitted diseases, the core factors are lack of educational background which causes unemployed and pushes them towards prostitution and makes them carrier of STDs. Therefore increasing rate of sexually transmitted diseases in transgender community is very strongly connected to the educational and employment status. Hence, the study sheds light on the employment and educational background of transgender individuals in the city of Kolkata.

Educational background of Transgender people in Kolkata :

Transgender students who fail to stick to the traditional gender roles set by the society are often called names, bullied and made fun of in schools. Many of them even face verbal and physical abuse by the students and teachers. As a result they refuse to go to school as they feel afraid and unprotected. Dropping out of school makes their already existing slim chances of employment slimmer.

The Table 2 shows the educational status of transgender individuals. As per the analysis, 5% of transgender people are illiterate, 61.66% have been to primary school, 30% have studied till

secondary school and 3.33% have done degree courses.

Educational status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Illiterate	3	5
Primary school	37	61.66
Secondary school	18	30
Degree	2	3.33

Source: Field Survey

Employment status of Transgender people in Kolkata :

Transgender individuals are often not welcomed either in organized or unorganized sectors because of transphobia among general population. The ones who are employed face abuse and discrimination at the work place. Another major problem in many offices is the use of toilet. In majority of the cases transgender individuals are not allowed to use toilets as per their convenience. Such gender based discrimination often makes them leave their jobs and work as beggars and prostitutes for survival.

The employment status of Transgender people has been represented by Table 3. According to the results, 13.33% of them are unemployed, 16.66% are employed and the rest 70% are employed in the underground economy as prostitutes. As they face economic vulnerability, social exclusion and lack of educational and employment opportunities, prostitution becomes the easiest source of income for them. Multiple sex partners, lack of knowledge regarding usage of condoms and unprotected anal sex among transgender women lead to high risk of transmission of sexually transmitted diseases.

Employment status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Unemployed	8	13.33
Employed	10	16.66
Employed in underground economies (Prostitution)	42	70

Source: Field Survey

Conclusion :

The transgender community still faces harassment as they are considered to be socially deviant, sexually predatory and mentally ill. They are judged burden by a society which doesn't understand them. The stigma and discrimination towards the gender nonconformity affect their physical and mental health. Due to extreme harassment and rejection, they usually end up dropping out of their schools or resigning from their jobs. Most of them turn towards prostitution to survive and attract various sexually transmitted diseases. They have very poor access to medical and health care facilities which often leaves their diseases untreated. Hence, the first protective measure is to provide medical facilities to them. Section 377 of Indian Penal Code that had imposed a ban on gay sex has recently been scrapped by the Supreme Court. Many argued that legalizing homosexuality would increase the rate of sexually transmitted diseases among transgender individuals as there would be no barrier to control them from having unnatural sexual intercourse anymore. But in reality the case is completely opposite. As per the data provided above, involvement of transgender

individuals in unnatural sex and being affected by STD through it is already too high. If homosexuality gets legalized or recognized, chances are there that the rate of STD among them might decrease as they will be more comfortable discussing their diseases in health care institutions and seeking treatment. Secondly, they would be accepted in the society and encouraged to be educated and employed so that they are not abandoned to an extent where prostitution remains the only choice. Another significant way to stop discrimination towards them and bringing them to the main stream society is to spread awareness among general population regarding transgender and gender nonconforming people. Even before showing compassion by the society, acceptance should be revealed by the family of a transgender person where he or she is to grow up as a human being as the famous proverb says "Charity begins at home".

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