

Original Research Article

## Social Support System of Hijras and Other Trans Women Populations in 17 States of India

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Hijras and other trans women (TW) communities face several stressors in their lives, especially stigma and discrimination related to being a trans person. Social support is essential to cope up with such stressors. This study explores and describes the various social support systems available to trans women in India.

**Methodology:** We conducted 50 focus group discussions (FGDs) with TW and 75 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with community key informants. FGDs and IDIs were audio recorded, transcribed and translated into English. The data were analyzed using a framework approach and major categories and themes related to social networks and support systems of trans women were identified.

**Results:** For most TW, the primary support system was their own community - other trans peers and Gurus (masters) who provided various kinds of support - especially for basic needs like shelter and food. Being part of hijra or other trans women also reported the support they received from non-governmental organisations and trans community-led organisations in relation to life skills education, vocational training and linking with government's social protection schemes. Besides trans community persons and agencies, TW also reported moral and emotional support from their male sexual partners and a few straight friends. Supportive family members seemed to be less common. TW, especially those engaged in sex work, reported violence and extortion from police and law enforcing authorities. Several TW informed that emotional and psychological support, financial and material needs, and personal safety and security were extended by trans community members themselves, although a few instances of abuse and discrimination by their own peers were reported too. TW reported limited support from their parents and siblings.

**Conclusions:** Hijras and other transwomen require better understanding and social support from the government officials and general public, mainly their own families.

**Key words:** Social support system, trans-women, India.

### INTRODUCTION

Despite Indian society's general attitude of acceptance and tolerance, there appears to be limited public knowledge and understanding on same sex sexual orientation and people whose gender identity and expression are incongruent with their biological sex. <sup>[1]</sup> The transwomen (TW) community receives less social

support from their families of origin. <sup>[2]</sup> It has been found that most of the TW are rejected by their biological families and create families of their choice. <sup>[3]</sup> Since many of them move away from their homes, they do not expect support from their biological families in the long run. They experience lot of challenges especially when they are not in a position to earn or have a

limited earning capacity due to lack of employment opportunities or prevalent health concerns. Lack of respectable livelihood options is the major reason for a significant proportion of TW to choose or continue to be in sex work. [1] Many of the TW people would have experienced some form of harassment or violence in their life. [4] They also face legal issues like legal recognition to their gender identity, same-sex marriage, child adoption, inheritance, wills and trusts, immigration status, employment related discrimination, and proper access to public and private health facilities. [1] Their acceptance and support system may vary in different states of the country. This study helps us to understand acceptance of TW, provision of help and roles played by various social support systems for TW community in 17 states of India.

## METHODOLOGY

This analysis is an off-shoot of a study on mapping and size estimation of TG and TW populations in 17 states of India. Detailed methodology of the original study has been published. [5]

We collected qualitative data from all the seventeen states, namely Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Manipur, Nagaland, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal covering five south, west, east, north and central regions of India. The study states were selected on the basis of urban/semi urban/rural nature, availability of data on the density of Hijra and TG population, availability of HIV prevalence data and presence of NGOs/CBOs which work with MSM and/or Hijra and TW community. To collect the qualitative data, we used focus group discussions (FGDs) with TW community representatives, and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with community key informants, primarily their gurus and community leaders. Qualitative data was collected

through 50 FGDs (50x10; n=500) and 75 IDIs.

Before proceeding with FGDs and IDIs, written informed consent was obtained from the respondents. The IDIs and FGDs were recorded in the local language in addition to digital recording (wherever consent was given for audio recording); and also detailed notes were taken (with verbatim quotes that illustrate the key concepts). Themes were identified by looking for similarities, differences and relationships between categories. Major categories and themes related to the social networks of the TW community were identified and inferences were drawn from both FGDs and IDIs.

The FGDs and IDIs were conducted by experienced moderators/interviewers across all the states who were given specific training on ethical considerations involved in the study along with training in data collections. There was a recorder (note-taker) in each FGD who recorded notes of the entire discussion, including non-verbal communications. Each FGD/IDI took about 60 to 90 minutes.

**Ethics statement:** The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Human Ethics committee of NIE.

## Findings

### *Support from the TW community*

The TW community has a strong social network and support system within the community. Many TW informed that since they have left their biological families, the senior TW who took care of them, play a very important role in providing support and strength like family members. Gurus were often considered and seen as mothers in majority of the states; the community members expressed that gurus were the primary support system related to basic human needs and emotional and psychological support since the very beginning of their association with the community.

*"We will get full support..... they are our family. We have left our house and come here once our sex is changed;....Now*

.....only our community people take care of us. We cannot go back home also; there are problems in our house and also with our neighbours..... So our community people are the only support to us; we have no other support.... without them, we do not know where to go, it's like no point in being alive also.....” (Punjab)

“....the whole support that we get is from our own community. All people stay together and if there is any problem also we will help each other.....” (Andhra Pradesh)

“The support which I get from my TW family is that I can talk to them, I can share my happiness and sorrow and in case if any of my work is pending..... I can tell them.....they also help me.... The TW who stays with me..... her name is Pillu, she supports me in everything and so do I, and we are like sisters....” (Maharashtra).

“We have to help out each other in case of problems, as we are not very attached to our (biological) families. We are more attached to our community.” (Chhattisgarh)

In Tamil Nadu, the support provided by the community members was satisfactory in providing food and shelter and also, in caring them.

“Our society understands our feelings and gives us food and clothing.....will not see, whether.....rich or poor. We all are one and will be kind.” (Tamil Nadu)

In Uttar Pradesh, it was explained by the community members that, after leaving their families they got attached to a particular guru and that guru fulfilled their needs till they themselves could get engaged in income generating activities. There was a social obligation within the community that they could not shift from one Gharana to another.

“The guru only takes care of fights among us because we can't do anything on our own. If we get into trouble with the police, we don't do anything but call our gurus and then, they solve everything.” (Uttar Pradesh)

In West Bengal, the majority of the community members lived with the fellow TW and it became very important for them to extend support to each other in need.

In case of states of Bihar and Rajasthan, TW community mentioned that the gurus in the state did not treat their followers very well; they exploited them on a regular basis. They said if they earned money by doing badhai (asking for alms) and dance programs, gurus took half of the money and remaining money was divided among the rest of the group. On the contrary, there was also punishment for those who rebel.

“...We don't get any support openly. It is not that we can do any work according to our wish. If we go against them then they don't support us.” (Bihar).

“They (gurus) ask the 'chelas' to bring 'badhai'. If we don't go with them then they punish us. We get punishment of money. They even torture us. What kind of support will they give? .....” (Bihar).

“We don't get any help. They don't accept that even we are born like them only. They are all sitting like bosses. They are just concerned about money. They call us in the morning and dispose us in the evening. If we don't go with them for functions then we get punishment also.” (Rajasthan)

#### **Support from NGOs/CBOs**

The support from NGOs and CBOs was in terms of getting life skills education and livelihood activities for the educated members of the community. The agencies involve TW in regular awareness programs and competitions and keep them engaged in supplementary activities.

“...they provide awareness to us in health related matters and conduct medical checkups at frequent intervals on TB, HIV, etc... They give us counseling on medical grounds and provide awareness about life threatening diseases....” (Punjab)

The organizations working in Odisha for TW community had provided them increased access to the government health facilities and livelihood options, in addition to promoting safe sex practices.

In the states of Manipur and Nagaland, the TW expressed that the NGOs/CBOs were very much accessible to them; they could share any problems with the organizations and the solutions provided by them satisfied TW's needs. They also provided interventions on livelihood and income generation activities. They had imparted skills on tailoring, training in beautician course, etc. and had given freedom to choose their professions.

In Karnataka and Maharashtra, TW were supported by providing access to social protection schemes such as arranging for ration cards, ID cards, bank accounts and insurance policies.

*"In NGOs, they won't discriminate that we are TW. We get ration cards, we can open bank accounts..... We can tell our problems to police (about gundas), and the general public..... they solve our problems. They support us from family side also. ....we get our share from our house property."* (Karnataka).

*"They give lot of care to us. They also take us for medical checkups; arrange to provide services like blood test twice a year. We get number of benefits from CBOs."* (Kerala)

#### **Support from friends outside the community and non-community members**

The relationship with non-community members was not very cordial as per majority of the TW people from different states like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand and Karnataka. They expressed that they had to face abuse and exploitation often, from the mainstream society and in addition, few of them expressed that they had been victims of physical violence.

*"...There is no support .....what we get is exclusion and insult from general community. It would be good if they won't insult us. We do not need any support from them except, respect."* (Andhra Pradesh).

*"Firstly, non-community people used to tease us, by saying "see that 'chakka, hijra' is going'" but after giving*

*awareness to those people, now they have come to know about us."* (Karnataka)

The support provided by the MSM friends had been very well recognized by the community members. They informed that MSM gave them shelter and extended their help, when the TW were out of their biological family and when the community did not come forward to help.

*"MSM are also good people.... They share all kinds of things with me. They do everything but they don't disclose their identity in front of the world. They support me indirectly....."* (Rajasthan)

Other than the friends from their community, the male partners who lived with TW had been recognized as great support by the community. They felt that due to presence of male partners within the household they, not only felt safe and secured, but also they could help them in day to day life, such as in household chores, shopping (going to market) and taking care of medical needs, etc.

*"We get both mental support and physical support from our male partners. Physical support means they take us to the market, shopping spot, doctors, etc. Also they provide monetary support. By mental support I mean when we are emotionally disturbed they take care of our feelings"* (Odisha).

In the state of Punjab, the TW community mentioned that majority of the non-community members supported them in the times of need.

*"Yes, they help us. Sometimes, when we have some problems, they come to help us. ....If we want to go anywhere, they help us..... they give us lift (escort us)".* (Punjab)

Some of the TW reported that their neighbors and friends from the non-community provided financial support. Few TW also expressed that it depended on individuals but no incidents of violence and subjugation had been shared by the community.

In U.P., the relationship had been cordial in terms of support provided and received from the mainstream society. Community felt that there has been a change in the acceptance level of the general population which provided them scope for free expression of their gender identity and sexuality.

*“We get good support from them.....Certain friends stand with me whenever I require their help or support for e.g. going to court, etc. I have a childhood friend who lives in Govind Nagar (not very near). If I need him...for some help.... he comes all the way from Govind Nagar and when he is in need, I go all the way to Govind Nagar.” (Uttar Pradesh)*

The community members in the state of West Bengal shared that by and large they had good rapport with the non-community members and mainstream society.

In states like Rajasthan, marginalization also created barrier in accessing the means of development and progress, such as educational facilities. A considerable amount of TW reported that they enrolled in educational facilities but stopped going to colleges because of the harassment and provocation they faced there, daily.

#### ***Support from Police and Law Enforcement authorities***

Police officials and other law enforcing authorities who came in contact with TW on regular basis such as Railway Protection Force (RPF) did not support TW community in majority of the states. As expressed by the community, they were the perpetrators of physical violence on a regular basis. The community engaged in commercial sexual activities and other means of income generation, which made them, come in contact with the law enforcing authorities. Many community members shared their experiences during the discussions that they had faced discrimination, physical and sexual abuse and seclusion from law enforcing authorities in majority of the study states.

Whereas, there were some experiences of support, where the police officials had protected the rights of the community and prevented exploitation. The support was mainly extended in the states where the TW community was in adequate number to represent their presence in the mainstream society such as southern states or western states of India.

#### ***Support on basic needs and emotional security***

In general, after leaving their biological families, TW were taken care of by the community members or their Gurus for shelter, food and all the basic human requirements till they engaged in income generating activities.

After exploring their gender identity and expressing it to the biological family and society at large, the TW developed a feeling of fear, shame and stigmatization, which led them to anxiety and sense of helplessness. Most of them, especially young TW faced rejection and refusal from the biological family and society for free and open expression of their gender identity. TW felt that it is very important for them to receive love and support and approval to develop a feeling of self esteem and self sufficiency. The community members, not only gave love and affection required by individuals but also inculcated a feeling of confidence and togetherness.

#### ***Support on sense of belonging***

The community accepted the members when it was more important for them to be accepted and cared. After the rejection from family and society, only the community members provided love and affection and fulfilled the need for acceptance and belonging.

*“Like every other human being in this world, we also need certain basic things in our lives. For us most important things are love, affection, protection and strength which are provided by the community members only. If we have any problem, no matter how big or small they are, first of all we will inform our community members and friends, not even to our biological*

*family..... may be because of this only .....we are living freely and surviving in the society. Since we are in a group, we have no tension".(Uttar Pradesh)*

#### **Support on financial and other material needs**

TW experienced problems in getting regular employment. If at all they get a job it would be under-employment. There were frequent change-over of jobs due to their gender identity and ill treatment. Due to low income and earnings of the TW community, they needed support for financial stability and economic security. The exchange of money, materials and service happened on a regular basis within the community members. As expressed by number of community members, fellow TW community were the ones, they could reach out to, in situations of financial needs.

*"Our incomes are not always regular nor are they very high. So we sometimes run out of money for emergencies. In that case, we may even ask our friends for sums as low as 100 or 200 rupees. Since, we all live together and they know us personally, most of them readily lend us the helping hand. Without such close bonding, it would be difficult for marginalized community like us." (Bihar).*

*"..... when I say that I'm poor, they sometimes offer help to us. Suppose I need 100 bucks (rupees) for my illness, my community people will help me maximum..." (Tamil Nadu)*

*"We are single-minded, even if it is about wearing sari, or money matters, we share among us and we share our food or jewellery among each other. My friend has the best collection of sari and jewellery and she shares it with us and we return the favor too. I also get help especially for dance programs. When we go for sex, our friends ask us whether we use condoms or not. If we don't have one with us they will lend us one." (Tamil Nadu)*

#### **Support for Safety and Security**

Due to regular incidents of violence and harassments, it is very important for the community members to extend their support

to TW and ensured their safety. They always ensure physical safety and security of the community members. Many TW clarified that when they had problems with police or with road side rowdies, the gurus helped them.

*"..... my community comes in the first place in supporting each other; we stay united and help each other and my community will be there for me anytime. There are elder groups and gurus. If we have problems with police or roadside rogues, we go to our gurus and they come forward to solve our problems." (Andhra Pradesh)*

While handling the police and court cases, gurus often utilize their resourcefulness and network with the mainstream society. And also, because of low educational level, poor socio-economic background and limited knowledge about the systems in society, it is important for TW to receive support from the experienced individuals within the community.

#### **Nature of relationship with family members**

Majority felt that the support extended by the biological family was mainly financial. The need for emotional and psychological support was not fulfilled by the biological family due to lack of physical proximity.

The community sometimes paid for the education of younger siblings of TW or lent money whenever there was a need.

*"They (TW's family members) are poor people. Some have 7 daughters, some have 4 daughters and some with two daughters. They have small business. They have to arrange marriage for their daughters. We help them with clothes or money. But due to problems from the society, they don't want to keep any relations with us." (Bihar)*

TW explained that they did not stay with their families because they faced difficulty in practicing commercial and non-commercial sex while living with the family. However, they visited them once in a while. Some TW informed that they

received help from their families financially or on health grounds.

*“Good, we visit. We don’t stay much at home but we visit. And if, there is some financial or health problem, they do help us...” (Assam)*

Many TW felt that, the biological families experience pressure due to societal expectations and conventions and they prefer not to keep any relations with TW. They mentioned that male members of the family were more against, TW in the family. However, the females like grandmother, mother and sisters would be comparatively supportive and try to meet them at a pre-decided place, the location of which would be kept hidden (confidential) from the family and the neighbors.

The acceptance and support among the family members was reported to be high in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

*“Yes, our family supports us completely and says that, ‘you stay with us only; whenever there will be a division in the property, you too will be given your share.” (Uttar Pradesh)*

As far as acceptance within the family in Tamil Nadu was concerned, the level of involvement in the family, acceptance and recognition differed in individual cases. The majority of the TW in the state shared that they had acceptance within the family to a certain level. Few had relations with the family, but did not visit their family members often nor got any support.

In some states like Jharkhand and West Bengal, TW did not have any relationship with the biological family because the families did not accept their TW identity.

*“I don’t have any contact. We have father, mother, brother, uncle and everyone among us only (in the TW community).” (Jharkhand).*

*“We don’t know about them; since childhood we are with our gurus only. ....TW have TW only as their family.” (Jharkhand).*

*“We do not get much support from family. In front, they are showing that they are supporting us but actually they are not. They support us when needed. If I earn then I would give my income to my parents. If I do not have income then I would have to leave the house.” (West Bengal)*

Very few TW had some relationships and association with the family members in the state of Rajasthan. The families forced them to leave the family once they disclosed their gender identity. The societal pressure and discrimination based on gender identity compelled the family members to force them to leave family.

*“I don’t have any support from my family after 2006. It was very difficult to make them understand about my feelings; sometimes there will be quarrel with my brother and sometimes with my father.” (Rajasthan)*

Majority of the TW community in the state of Karnataka felt that society did not support them in any manner. They were always subjected to discrimination and inequity resulting from their gender identity.

*“It’s not good. Even we will not be comfortable with them. We are scared of them. In any function, we are not allowed to go.” (Karnataka)*

*“We don’t have good relationship with our family. They abuse us. They don’t understand us. Our family members don’t want to keep contact with us as we are kinnars and it might be stigma for them if they keep contact with us.” (Chhattisgarh).*

In the state of Manipur, the TW community had acceptance with their biological families. Majority of them were living with their biological families and could receive love and affection from the family members.

## **DISCUSSION**

In majority of the states, the TW community provided the support system for the TW people. Even for safety and security they had to depend on their senior community people or Gurus. In few states,

gurus were reported to be exploiting the TW community, particularly in case of financial matters. In most of the states, the NGOs and CBOs provided them support on life skills education, livelihood activities and also provided access to social protection schemes.

Support provided by the law enforcing authorities was not satisfactory in most of the states. In all the 17 states, the acceptance level of the TW with their biological families ranged from non-acceptance to acceptance.

In a study done by Lombardi et al. [4] it was found that approximately 60% of the transgender individuals experienced some form of harassment or violence and 26% experienced a violent incident. In addition 37% reported experiencing economic discrimination. In another study by Emilia et al, [6] it was found that over half the study participants experienced some form of harassment or violence within their lifetime, with a quarter experiencing a violent incident. In the present study many TW mentioned that they have to face discrimination, physical and sexual abuse and seclusion from law enforcing authorities in majority of the study states in India.

In a study done by Rhonda, [7] 42% (n=50) of the TGs had mentioned of being threatened with physical violence. In the present study, the police officials and law enforcing authorities were reported to be the perpetrators of physical violence in most of the 17 states.

A study done in Mumbai [8] revealed that a great majority of the hijras stated that they had experienced problems with police, including policemen from area police stations (50.9%), railway police (26.3%) or traffic policemen (8.8%). In the present study, many TW had reported that Police officials and other law enforcing authorities, including Railway Protection Force (RPF) were responsible for the physical violence of the TW on regular basis. Commenting on a Railway Police woman's reaction, one hijra responded "once a railway police woman asked me to show my ticket, I told

her that "I am a pottai"; she replied "Oh! I am sorry". I swayed my way out very gracefully....." It is important here to take note of the findings from the data of civil society about women being more favourable to hijras than men. [8]

A study [9] reported that all transgender people perceived less social support from their families than their non-transgender sisters. In the present study, few from the state of Tamil Nadu had relations with their families, but did not visit their family members often nor received any support. In some states like Jharkhand and West Bengal, they did not have any relationship with the biological family because the families did not accept their TW identity.

Many TW in the present study were dissatisfied about their occupation. In addition there were frequent job changes and ill treatment at the work places. In another study by Hill et al. [10] many transgender individuals reported forced job changes due to their gender identity. Out of 402 transgender respondents in a study, 37% reported workplace discrimination that included firing, demotions, and unjust disciplinary actions. [4] Employment discrimination was cited as a key motivator for TW participating in sex work as a result of economic need. [11]

### **Limitation**

The findings from this study cannot be generalized to all the states of India. Even in the study states, the IDI or the FGD were done only with certain members/groups; so the findings cannot be generalized to the respective states or the entire country.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

➤ In most of the states the senior TW community/Gurus provided basic human needs and emotional support since the very beginning of their association with the community. Financial and other material needs were taken care of by the TW community. However in some states



TW were exploited and sometimes punished by their senior TW.

- In majority of the states, NGOs and CBOs were providing life skills education and livelihood activities in addition to involving them in awareness programs. They also trained TW in tailoring, beautician course, etc. and provided access to social protection schemes such as arranging for ration cards, ID cards, bank accounts and insurance policies.
- TW had to face abuse, exploitation and physical violence from mainstream society in most of the states. However they got support from MSM community
- They did not get much support from police and law enforcing authorities; instead they faced discrimination, physical and sexual abuse in majority of the states.
- TW supported their biological families financially in some states; however in some states biological families disowned them and in very few states TW were accepted in all sense by their own families.

It is suggested that hijras and other TW require better understanding and social support from general public and the government officials, mainly their own families.

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