Transmasculine persons’ experiences in navigating family and social spaces

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1. INTRODUCTION

- **Globally** - scant literature on transmasculine people’s health  
  *(Reisner et al, 2016)*

- **India:**
  - Most trans health studies – focused on HIV among trans women *(Chakrapani et al, 2018)*
  - **Near complete lack of studies** on transmasculine people’s health  *(e.g., Bowling et al, 2019)*
Western Lit.: provide evidence that transmasculine people have high risks for mental health conditions – e.g., depression, suicidal ideation and self-harm. (e.g., Reisner et al, 2013 & 2016; White Hughto et al, 2015)

Mental health conditions: Often secondary to stigma and discrimination – Minority Stress Theory and Gender Affirmation Model. (Meyer 1995; Sevelius 2013)
2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We aimed to qualitatively investigate transmasculine people’s experiences in affirming their gender in family and social spaces. We asked:

1. What are the experiences of transmasculine people in affirming their gender identity/expression in private (family) and social spaces (educational settings and workplace)?
2. What influences, if any, such experiences have on their mental health?
3. What kind of resilience resources are available to cope with discrimination experiences?
3. METHODOLOGY

• **Sites:** Mumbai (The Humsafar Trust); Chennai (Sahodaran)

• **Inclusion criteria:** self-identified transmasculine people, ≥ 18 years

• **Qualitative Methods:**

  *Total = 27 transmasculine participants*

  - 4 *Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)* (n=17)
  - 10 *In-depth Interviews (IDIs)*
Sampling / Recruitment:

*Maximum variation sampling*, a kind of *purposive sampling*

- Peer-directed recruitment of initial few seeds, and then participant-directed snowball technique

(*variations in relation to: age, SE status, gender transition status, employment status)

Data analysis:

A combination of framework analysis & techniques from grounded theory approach

(Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Ethics approval:

From the IRBs of the Humsafar Trust, and PGIMER, Chandigarh.
4. FINDINGS
## Sociodemographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Focus Group discussions (n=17)</th>
<th>In-depth interviews (n=10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (Years)</strong></td>
<td>Mean = 25</td>
<td>Mean = 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Range: 19-30</td>
<td>Range: 20-28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thiru nambi (Chennai)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trans man (Mumbai)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed college degree</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher sec. school</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed (pvt./self)</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married to a cis woman</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With parents</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With trans peers</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living alone/Hostel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A. Navigating family spaces

B. Navigating social spaces
   - Society / Public spaces
   - Educational settings
   - Workplace

C. Resilience strategies & resources
Navigating Family Spaces
Navigating Family Spaces

**Gender expression**
- "Boyish" behavior not frowned upon, mostly
- Stereotypical behavior of boys

**Reactions to gender expression**
- Openly masculine gender expression – clothing, hair style

**Consequences of gender expression**
- Restrictions
  - In clothing, hair style, going out
  - In socializing with boys
- Violence (physical/verbal abuse)
- Punishment
- Leaving home
- Eventual family acceptance

**Parents try “conversion” therapies – religious, medical**

**Timeframes**
- Early childhood
- Late childhood
- Adolescence
- Early Adulthood/Adult

**Concealment**
(of gender identity, not gender expression)
Early childhood: Parental indifference to gender expression

- Many reported feeling differently about their gender at 4/5 years old and started questioning themselves:
  
  “Why I feel like a boy?”, “What’s happening to me?”, “Why am I different?”

- Participants recalled exhibiting masculine traits and behaviours:
  e.g., wearing boy’s clothing or playing with boys.

- None reported negative reactions from parents;
  most parents seemed tolerant.
Late childhood:
Restrictions by family members to conform

- **Parents’ pressure to fit into feminine stereotype** was quite challenging for many:

> When I entered 8th grade, I was forced to add one thing inside my T-shirt because my upper body started growing...I asked my mother, ‘Why?’ She simply said, ‘Similar to the baniyan [male vest] worn by your [boy] friends, you need to wear it’. They stopped me from going to swimming class...Restriction started. I could not accept it. (IDI, Mumbai)

- **Trying “Conversion”** – through religious man or psychiatrist.
Concealment & Consequences of disclosure

- Due to fear of negative reactions (anticipated stigma), some participants concealed or downplayed their masculine gender expression at home.

- Negative reactions, including verbal / physical abuse from parents, after disclosing their gender identity when they were adolescents.

  My parents questioned - ‘Why you behave like this?’ I told them that I want to be a man and not a woman. But they did not listen. My father, mother and everyone started beating me...They tied my hands with rope...They forced me to wear girl’s clothing. One day I left my home.

(IDI, Chennai)
Some participants feared that disclosure would lead to bad consequences:
- **Forced marriage** or
- **Eviction** from family home.

*I wish to share my identity with them. But they may not understand and want me to get married* [to a cis-man]. *Parents need to help us. We cannot accept that our own parents see us wrong, and dump us on the streets.*

(IDI, Chennai)
Negotiations & Tactics used for expressing gender

**Negotiation**
Balancing family’s expectations with one’s desire to express gender identity:

- **Agreed to wear girl’s clothing** and ‘payal’ (anklets), and keep long hair -- when going to:
  - seeing relatives in villages
  - schools/colleges
- But negotiated to **wear one’s choice of clothing at home**.

**Tactics**

- Provide reasons (to family/others) for being in “boy’s clothing”:
  - **sports person**
  - having different clothing ‘taste’
Fear of society’s judgement & family nonacceptance

- **Fear of being ridiculed by relatives and the society** at large led parents to prevent their children from behaving in ways that are considered inappropriate:
  
  *My father asked ‘Why did you cut your hair?’… He said -- ‘We are Maharashtrians, What will the villagers [native place] tell if they happen to see you?’ He asked me to be like my sisters.* (IDI, Mumbai).

- **Parents – Fear of negative consequences to other family members**
  
  (siblings’ marriage, family prestige)
Family acceptance

- Varied:
  - acceptance from the beginning
  - eventual acceptance
  - nonacceptance

*My father loves me a lot. I discussed with him about everything: the changes happening within me and my interest in getting transitioned. He understood me and has been very supportive. He even accompanied me to hospitals for check-ups. He also spoke about this to my sisters. But they are not supportive.*

(IDI, Mumbai)
Navigating Social Spaces
Society / Public spaces

- **Society’s lack of understanding and awareness** about trans men was a major barrier in expressing gender identity and contributed to psychological distress.

  *I would say that the public is not aware of trans men. Society includes everyone - family, friends, relatives, colleagues, etc. They don’t consider us as trans men. Instead they think that we are lesbians.* (FGD, Mumbai)

- **Challenges in:**
  - Accessing public male spaces (male rest rooms, male train compartments)
  - Going through gender-segregated security checks (malls, airports)
Discrimination by neighbours and people on street:

Name-calling, misgendering

Impact: Loss of friendship and lack of understanding about gender identity among even ‘close friends’ became a source of distress.

My close friends said...‘you are a hijra, you can’t do anything, you only clap and engage in sex work’. I felt very sad...close friends are the ones who hurt you the most.

(IDI, Mumbai)
Educational settings

- Challenges:
  - In conforming to gender-specific dress code and hairstyle
  - In accessing public male spaces (male rest rooms)

- **Dress code restrictions -- a barrier to self-expression:**
  I hated wearing a girl’s uniform. When I was studying 12th standard, as per the school policy, girls should wear *salwar kameez* and *dupatta* as uniform...I preferred wearing shorts, T-shirts, shirts and pants... As soon as I returned from school, I used to remove and threw away the [girl’s] uniform.” (IDI, Mumbai)
Discrimination: A few participants reported discrimination from their college tutors: e.g., misgendering by using wrong pronouns such as ‘ma’am’ or ‘she’.

*In my college, when they [faculty] got to know about me, they tortured me a lot. They know about me. They knew that I don’t like to be called Ma’am. They used to do it intentionally...I used to feel very angry.*

(IDI, Mumbai)
Consequences

- Bullying
- Restroom issue
- Lack of support from teachers

Quitting School

I faced a lot of problem from my male schoolmate in school... He asked me – ‘Why are you using the male toilet?’ He asked, ‘Are you a male? Show me your parts.’ He told me ‘You are a Ussu, Ombodhu [derogatory terms]. Why are you coming to school?’ I got very angry and hit and broke his head. I stopped going to school.
Workplace

- Challenges in:
  - getting hired
  - conforming to gender-specific dress code and hairstyle
  - accessing male spaces (male rest rooms)
Problems in getting hired

Mismatch between appearance and legal IDs.

I went for a job interview [in film industry]. An interview panellist asked me whether I was a girl or a boy. My hair was short, and I was wearing pants and shirt. However, in my biodata, my gender was mentioned as a woman. This guy asked -- ‘If you are a girl why do you wear boy’s clothes?’ ... Although I got the job I did not go back. (IDI, Mumbai)

Dress code in workplace

• I started my career as a teacher in a school. That time I used to wear saree and churidar out of compulsion. The school policy did not allow me to wear an outfit that I like.” (IDI, Chennai)

Had to compromise in relation to dress code, as he had to support his family.
Discrimination

- Discrimination from immediate supervisors or co-workers based on their gender identity or expression.

    [In office] I was looked at differently by others because of the way I dress. I did not like wearing churidar or leggings. My co-workers teased me for my ‘dressing sense’. I did not like it.

    (IDI, Chennai)
To disclose or not?: Fear of negative consequences

- Participants who were consistently perceived as men preferred not to come out openly at their workplace as they did not see any reason for doing so or because they anticipated discrimination.

  *After taking hormone injections, my appearance has completely changed. It is difficult for others to identify me [as trans]. There is no need to disclose our identity.*” (IDI, Mumbai)
Challenges in transition at workplace

- Lack of gender-inclusive workplace policies made the work environment unsafe for transmasculine people:

> For those who are already working and have undergone transition, they might have confusion – ‘How will the company accept me? As a male or a female?’ Even if they were placed under the male category, they need to change their ID [identity] proof.”

  (FGD, Chennai)
Consequences of disclosure in workplace

❑ **Positive outcomes**: increased understanding, acceptance and support.

* I told my co-workers about me. Initially, they thought it was weird. But when I explained to them that it is not a psychiatric problem with examples from videos in YouTube - they started accepting me.*

(IDI, Chennai)

❑ **Negative reactions** *(avoiding / rejection)* impacted on their self-esteem. Some quit jobs.

* I worked in several places. Whenever I said about my feelings - none of them accepted me. They saw me as if I was mentally disturbed.*

(IDI, Chennai)
Resilience strategies & resources
Resilience strategies

Amidst these challenges, several resilience strategies were identified:

• Self-acceptance
• Strategic concealment/disclosure of trans identity
• Self-advocacy in negotiating gender presentation
• Having supportive families, friends, and partners
• Having supportive peers (offline/online)
Having supportive families, friends, and partners

- Social support protective against mental health symptoms such as depression and to contribute to increased self-esteem and self-acceptance.

- Social support as a resilience factor:

  *If we get support from the family we will never get to worry about outsiders. Family is the most important thing. If our family doesn’t have any issue with us, nobody can stop us.* (FGD, Mumbai)

  *I have a best friend who supports me both emotionally and financially from start to end. He is the one to whom I have disclosed about my identity. He was very supportive and understanding. Even during my surgery, he supported me financially.* (IDI, Mumbai)
Having supportive peers (offline/online)

- Participants with supportive peers reported good resilience in dealing with stress.

> Then [after a break up] I joined [a community agency’s support group]. It helped me a lot, I saw that there are other people like me.

(IDI, Mumbai)
Impact of experiences in family and social spaces...

- Fear of discrimination
- Concealment of gender identity/expression
- Experiences of discrimination
- Everyday challenges in negotiating gender expression
- Disclosure of gender identity

Psychologic Distress

- Lack of gender-affirmative legal IDs
- Support from family / peers
  - Resilience
- Quitting education/job
- Negative mental health consequences
5. CONCLUSION

• Social-structural gender norms and gender policing in familial and social spaces **pose extensive challenges** for transmasculine people in affirming their gender.

• Nevertheless, they often **overcame these challenges** with **limited resilience resources**, though sometimes at great costs to their mental health.
Implications: Multi-level interventions are needed to promote well-being among transmasculine people
7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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