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Editor: Prof. Shrawan K Sharma

www.thevedicpath.in

thevedicpath@gkv.ac.in

+91-9412074666

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Sustainability among Transgenders: Social Inclusion and Gender Equality

Neharika Sharma, Research Scholar,
Gurukula Kangri Vishwavidyalaya, Haridwar (U.K.)
email: neharikaaadhya88@gamil.com

Abstract

The Sustainability among Transgenders remains one of the prime objectives of government and society. The development is possible only if all the goals are achieved. There are various issues that need to be addressed at state and national level to ensure an inclusive development among the people of all genders. Gender equality and social inclusion serves as an important factor to achieve sustainability among transgenders. An inclusive and constructive approach is required to maintain a healthy lifestyle among all genders. This paper focus on the issues of gender inequality and social exclusion among transgenders with reference to autobiographies written by transgenders rights activist Vidya titled *I Am Vidya* and *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, talks about the grim situation and various issues of gender and sexuality faced by transgenders in their everyday life. This text will provide a deep insight into the personal life of Vidya and Laxmi, who with pride claims themselves a 'Hijra'.

Keywords: Sustainability, Gender Equality, Social Inclusion, Hijra, Transgender

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The adoption of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals has been one of the major recent achievements in sustainability. Human beings face many challenges to ensure that all people have the same development and well being opportunities. The Sustainable Development Goals is a new horizon with the most pressing challenges for human beings in the coming years. Sustainability is progress that satisfies the requirements of the present without compromising the potentiality of future generations, guaranteeing the balance between economic expansion, concern for the environment and communal well being. The Sustainable Development Goals, also known as the Global Goals, are a call from the United Nations to all countries around the world to address the immense challenges that humanity faces and to guarantee that all people have the same opportunities to live a better life without compromising our sphere. It's an inclusive development structure, across the world where global leaders have emphasised a fundamental message: 'leave no one behind'. It's an unparalleled move to eliminate disease, poverty and hunger and most importantly the global pledge to exterminate disparity of all folks.

These seventeen objectives framed by United Nations are unified and often the key to one's accomplishment will engage the issues most commonly related to another. The fundamental part of 'development' is to give closer consideration on achieving greater liberty, wellbeing and human rights. It is no longer possible to overlook favouritism, inequality and social segregation and their developmental consequences.

Gender specific behaviours, attitudes, individuality and expectations are socially, politically and ethnically

constructed. The view about the performing a specific gender role, may be a woman, man or transgender varies over time, perspective and within nations. Expectations are also based upon the power associations between men, women and other gender variant categories. Furthermore, Sustainable development demands the efforts to recognise, protect, value, and accomplish the rights of gender non-conforming individuals. The concept of gender inequality is sustained with the implications of norms, practises and beliefs are a social construct which implies that change is not only desirable or rationally correct, but also possible.

Gender serves as one of the most essential sources of inequality and exclusion in the world, regardless of the global commitments. Addressing gender inequality is a precondition for respecting, defending and fulfilling the right to sexual and reproductive wellbeing. Working holistically towards people of all diversity is a prominent step in achieving gender equality. Though developing programmes, it is apparent that gender inequality affects diverse groups of individuals in diverse ways. Gender norms and patriarchal organization are persistent and affect women and girls inexplicably. They have inferior position, lesser opportunities and less access to authority than men and boys. Therefore, advancement towards gender equality requires transformative corresponding performance to encourage women's rights and empowerment by tackling structural disparity that is rooted in communal structures, including addressing gender gaps, unequal policies and prejudice that have traditionally affected the complete involvement of gender variant people in progress.

According to IPPF (International Planned Parenthood Federation) Gender Equality Policy (2014), the definition of gender equality has been adopted, specifically as:

Gender equality means equality of opportunity for women, men, Intersex and transgender people to realize their full rights and Potential. It signifies an aspiration to transform structural inequalities behaviour patterns and social norms, leading to social change and sustainable development. Gender equality requires specific strategies aimed at eliminating gender inequalities.

Gender equality remains one of the most important objectives to achieve sustainability, ensuring equal opportunities, and outcomes among the human beings. Gender equality or equality of the sexes is a fundamental human right. To attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health, gender equality is one of the primary goals to achieve the overall wellbeing. Gender equality is possible through holistic development and working with the people of all diverse groups. Gender norms and patriarchal organisation are manifested throughout and affect the progress towards gender equality. Gender equality is achieved when men, women and gender besides women and men or gender identities outside of the gender binary i.e. LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) enjoy the same rights and opportunities across all sectors of society, including economic participation and decision making. Those who have traditionally been marginalised by society and face extreme vulnerability- are a community with whom the term gender inequality is most associated.

Social inclusion is another vital element to guard their rights and provide justice. Transgenders experience tremendous social elimination that translates into greater exposure to HIV, psychological wellbeing conditions, inadequate access to education and employment, and failure

of opportunities for financial and social progression. In addition, abhorrence and violence towards a faction of individuals who do not conform to social norms about gender visibility in numerous episodes of severe hostility towards transgender individuals. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) views its effort in the vicinity of HIV through the lens of human rights and advances a series of growth solutions such as poverty reduction, enhanced governance, dynamic nationality, and access to righteousness.

The term ‘Transgender’ refer to people who shift away from the gender they are assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans-*) the margins constructed by their culture to label and contain that gender. Some people move away from their birth- assigned gender because they feel strongly that they properly belong to another gender in which it would be better for them to live in their own space. In any case, it is *the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place-* rather than any particular destination or mode of transition- that best characterizes the concept of ‘transgender’. The usage of term in Indian context has traditionally been translated into English as “eunuch” or “hermaphrodite”, where “the irregularity of male genitalia is central to the definition”, although LGBT human rights activists have sought to include them as being transgender (Stryker and Whittle, 2006).

While the visibility of transgender people is increasing in popular culture, still they face severe discrimination, stigma and systemic inequality. The new sustainable development agenda includes everyone, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized. As noted by UN Secretary- General Ban Ki- Moon, “the challenges faced by any become the challenges faced by each of us- sometimes gradually, but often suddenly.”

In short, the inclusion of transgender people is important so that they can contribute to and benefit from sustainable development.

In this paper, I would like to present the hard facts about transgenders with the assistance of Indian text written by transgender social activist Laxmi Narayan Tripathi titled *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* and *I Am Vidya* by Living Smile Vidya. These texts bring the harsh realities faced by transgenders which needs immediate focus so as to bring a change in their community and people. They both fought against the traditional norms of society and made effort to bring change and acceptance in the society. The process of transition is possible only when the Government and society equally steps forward to take initiatives beneficial for the upgrading of transgender community.

Both Laxmi and Vidya faced discrimination on the grounds of their sexuality and gender, often considered as illegal and unnatural. The word unnatural itself evokes the feeling of disgust and isolation. Society plays an important role in framing the rigid societal norms and thus, transgenders stands apart. Due to existence at the margins, they are vulnerable and most marginalised section of society. They are often considered as deviant in their behaviour and sexual nature. The label 'deviant' is often taken as universal thought and restricts their growth in various spheres. In this context SK Sharma states, "With a spoiled identity and engagement in the non-normal activities like homosexuality, the hijras are, therefore, assumed to be deviants and their activities as deviant behaviour".

The transgender or transsexual community exists at the extreme margins of the society in India. In a society that recognizes only two genders, they are often rendered

invisible, ridiculous, horrific or disgusting. Transgenders have undergone discrimination both in the family and society. Society does not easily recognize transgenders and they are exile in the society. In such a society, bound by numerous rules and regulations distinctive of a heteronormative, caste-based society, a child who changes from male to female or vice versa, is certainly not accepted. Only those who have gone through the struggle know what it is to be gendered differently in a society that acknowledges imposed gender systems as natural and the norm.

Discrimination against transgender people is real, pervasive and often legal. Transgender people do face widespread mistreatment, and discrimination. Transgender youth face high rates of bullying, homelessness, abuse and physical and sexual assault. The obstacles these people face are almost entirely social construct. Sexual minorities continue to suffer various forms of prejudice and discrimination at the hands of state and the wider society. The Hijras in India face various forms of discrimination because of their sexual ambiguity. Most Hijras live at the margins of society with very low status; the very word 'Hijra' is used in a derogatory manner. They often live on the fringes of society in poverty and work in prostitution. The deplorable condition of transgender in India is due to various social, political and economic conditions prevailing in present India. Stigma, discriminatory laws, social exclusion and general lack of understanding about transgender issues all make it difficult to protect them and their status.

Laxmi narrates an instance which speaks about the discrimination on account of sexuality and identity. She quotes, "Crestfallen, I left the Bombay Gymkhana, despite the fact that I was invited here as a speaker. I got thrown out.

I couldn't believe that I was being shown the door on account of my sexuality and identity" (129). This true event happened raises the issue of gender inequality and social exclusion. Such event clearly highlights their negligence and discrimination in the society. According to Nivedita Menon, "In India too, there was a polyvalence of gender identities and sexual desire even up to the nineteenth century, which was closed off in variety of ways, through legal and social interventions that disciplined a range of non-normative sexualities and family arrangements"

Vidya was also offended the way society calls hijras as unnatural and burden. Vidya was often insulted and ridiculed in front of public. Vidya gradually accepted the attitude of society towards hijras and lived with her pains and sorrows. Vidya quotes:

Insults heaped on me and all my shattered hopes repeatedly reinforced the fact that I was not considered a member of this society. The object of everyone's ridicule for so long, I came to regard all of society as something ridiculous- I came to believe that the world was full of mad men, within which I had to live with my body, my pain, and my sorrows. Vidya 93

Transgender youth are exposed to great distress in numerous ways. Scores of transgender people experience bodily and emotional violence for coming out or terror being created on a daily basis. Others may engage in at risk behaviours as a way to cope with uncertainty regarding their sexual characteristics. Accepting their identity and developing a reliable association is a huge challenge because the recognition of same sex attractions and desires may place them at risk.

I was girl. Unfortunately, the world saw me as a boy. Inwardly I wanted to be a girl, but I made every effort possible to hide my femininity from the outside world. I took particular trouble to remain inconspicuous at college, the unpleasant memories of my bitter experiences at school still fresh in my mind. I lead a false life of strenuous attempts to swagger like a man and speak like one. Vidya 33

Laxmi despite being subjected to sexual abuse in her childhood and being ostracised for her effeminate mannerisms and love of dancing, learnt to stand up not just for herself, but for her entire community. She quotes, “I discovered that passivity did not pay. It might endear me to society, but it came with a price. I decided at that moment to raise my voice against the things I did not like. Henceforth, I would not do anything against my will.”

In the piece of writing *Review of Me Laxmi, Me Hijra: An Autobiography of Laxminarayan Tripathi, Translated by Raja Rao and P.G Joshi*, Ishrat Jahan delineated the wretched condition of hijra community in Indian society and explicates the remarkable contribution made by Laxminarayan Tripathi. Ishrat Jahan also highlights the dejection of the transgender individual who becomes the sufferer of the sexual assault.

She also talked about the bitter truth of her life. How she was sexually abused in her early ages due to feminine feeling and gesture? Not only by her relatives but outsiders also. From her early childhood, she was in fourth standard, she joined a gay group of Ashok Row Kavi. She had several love affairs with many boys, forcibly or due to self-interest since her childhood. Unfortunately, she was used by boys sexually such as an object, and abandoned by them later. 489

Laxmi is fiercely independent in thought and progressive in her understanding of the world, which sometimes alienates her from her own hijra community. Even then she remains bold to fight for their rightful place in society, alongside herself. “I alone being respected wasn’t enough. I wanted that respect to percolate down to the lowest of the low among the hijras, so that we were all treated on par.”

Through this narrative we are introduced to the plight of an entire hijra community. When Laxmi becomes the first chairperson of the Dai Welfare Society, she says, “I felt empowered, and empowerment is not a word that normally exists in the vocabulary of a hijra. It is true that as a person, I, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, liked taking new challenges, but as a hijra I was never allowed to.” Laxmi is drawn to activism and takes up her new responsibilities with enthusiasm: she gives up dancing and takes up dialogue to bring about social change.

There are various other factors that explore the complexities in the lives of hijras. The rejection from family members, who do not support their existence enhances the difficulties and makes their life complex. Besides, family rejection they also undergo extreme verbal and physical abuse, isolation and discrimination. Social stigma pushes them to the periphery as a social out caste and many ends up doing begging and sex work for survival. Revathi, the transgender and social activist, discussed the inner challenges she faced during her journey. Being a hijra she was forced to take up sex work for survival. She quotes:

As a hijra I get pushed to the fringes of society. Yet I dared to share my innermost life with you-about being a hijra and also about doing sex work. My story is not meant to offend, accuse or hurt anyone’s sentiment. My

aim is to introduce to the readers the lives of hijras, their district culture, and their dreams and desires. HI seek to show that we hijras do have the right to live in this society. Revathi v-vi

Social exclusion is regarded as the foremost source of the psychic trauma of the third gender. They are often ostracized on account of their sexuality, identity and the existence of their community outside the socially constructed binaries. The people consider them as danger and a nuisance and run away at spotting them in the streets. The prejudice towards hijras is collectively shared together by men and women alike. The general public sometimes give the cash to the hijras, not with the sense of compassion, but to do away with them. The people of the mainstream society only regard hijras as subversive, rather accepting their attitude and behaviour towards them.

When Laxmi joined the hijra community, three weeks later, ten hijras became her chelas. She became *nani guru* and a chief member of a large family. The chelas of Laxmi worked as dancers in dance bars and some engaged in the profession of sex work. Laxmi narrates the predicament of hijras as:

In our group only Sangeeta, Mardana, and Vardaan did sex work. Soon the police began to harass them. There were bitter quarrels between the cops and the girls, and they landed up at the Sheelfata police station. Though these girls were not my chelas, they were hijras all the same, and the police had been btutal in their dealings with them. Laxmi 53

The continuous pestering faced by the hijras, can effortlessly be traced in the autobiography of Laxmi. Laxmi's

encounter with the law enforcement encouraged her to desire the life of activism. Another occurrence of physical assault is explained through the unpleasant incident of Subhadra. She went for sex work and never returned and reported deceased afterwards. Laxmi describes her misery in her words, “Subhadra’s death had opened our eyes to the dangers of being a hijra” (55). She has been murdered and the police was unable to find any substantiate proof of her murder. She relates, “Our fight with the world seemed so pointless. But could not afford to be silenced. We could not afford to be thrown out in jails and forgotten altogether” (56). The case of Subhadra’s murder was ultimately stopped for the lack of proof. This event tells the account of the grievances of hijras who are deserted and often poorly treated by the general public or even occasionally by the law.

Laxmi and Vidya portray, in various stages, their transition from male to female and identification with the hijra community. The transition process of Laxmi and Vidya includes verbal, physical aggressions and in addition the psychological violence remains an all- pervasive phenomenon. The vulnerability of the hijras is greater in the world of prostitution, where they are raped by both the rowdies and the police. The violence that their body has suffered, among other reasons, motivates them to take a stand and fight for their rights and the rights of sexual minorities in India.

The autobiographical account displays how hijra community are underprivileged and deprived of even their basic needs which are effortlessly accessible to other gender -males and females just by virtue of nature. They confront denial and abhorrence and survive in isolation due to which they desire for sense of belongingness and affectionate

relations. This results in diminished sense of worth in them leading to inferiority complex and behaviour disorders. The trauma generated by the dissatisfaction direct them to get involved in unlawful conduct. As rightly said by Emily Bronte in one of her famous quotes Terror made me cruel. The sense of fear inside them of being discarded and secluded forces them to indulge in anti social actions. In a manner it might be claimed that the society is accountable for ingraining the immoral tendencies in them. In an interview, Laxmi acknowledges that though numerous process have been implemented by the government for the advantage of the third gender, yet equal conduct of hijras still remains a distant cry in India.

Every human being in this world has the right to live their dreams and desires. But, negative approach of society or we could say the wrong attitude of society towards gender variant people makes their survival questionable. As a result, the feeling of dignity and self esteem diminishes. Such extreme condition even leads them to attempt suicide.

The autobiographical account reflects the individual's wish to acquaint with her own existence and experiences, but also serves as a devise to sensitize society about issues and struggle faced by marginalised segment of humanity. Laxmi writes, "My daily experience of discrimination, ridicule and pain, it is also to speak about my resistance and my joys." The text brings the excluded or the marginalised to the core of the description, articulating gender and sexuality in the struggle for human rights. It is a text that speaks about the wretched bodies, that is, bodies without social intelligibility. Through it, Laxmi and Vidya make their unheard voice loud. She makes an appeal for equal opportunity and human rights for transgender individuals. Laxmi demands "acceptance from

parents, from society, from the world to be human to live as we have chosen.” It is a very discerning writing which denounces bodily and verbal assault; discrimination and defiance of human rights.

Therefore, both narratives reflect the inner challenges and desires, crushed under the traditional norms of society. The narratives discussed, details the series of struggle to find an identity and carve her true self. The traumatic journey ends in self-realization where they finally bear fruits to the intolerable suffering in the past. The autobiographies screens the inside realities, giving the common reader a peep into their lifestyle, the rituals, discrimination, social exclusion, gender violence and the existentialism of a hijra.

To attain the immediate eradication of poverty and significant reduction of inequality and exclusion, inclusive approach needs to be integrated across the nations with a vision to accomplish sustainable development among all genders. The main theme in global development policy is the concept of social inclusion. Social inclusion is a process to connect people and communities with the mainstream society. Inclusion remains an important phase where socially excluded people or the marginalised section of society is included with the mainstream society. Inclusion of marginalised people and communities will bring equality of genders, opportunities to get education and employment, which remains the primary step to attain sustainability among the transgenders. Furthermore, the composite interplay between the series of factors that may influence gender equality and hence, social inclusion. To work at individual level, this helps us to locate biological and individual personal recorded particulars. At the relationship level, it examines the close associations that impact gender equality and social

inclusion. Various other factors could also be explored such as functioning at community and societal level, which consist of schools, workplaces and neighbourhood.

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