



# Transgender, Learned Helplessness, And Social Inclusion: Psychological, Biological, And Legal Perspectives In India

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## Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of transgender individuals in India through psychological, biological, and legal lenses, highlighting the development of learned helplessness and challenges to social inclusion. Despite legal recognition and constitutional protections, transgender people face pervasive social stigma, discrimination, and exclusion, which contribute to severe psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and heightened vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections. The article differentiates sex, gender, and sexual orientation, explaining biological and hormonal influences on gender identity and the process of gender transition. Learned helplessness is explored as a psychological consequence of persistent social rejection, victimization, and systemic barriers, resulting in diminished self-efficacy and hopelessness. The paper emphasizes the importance of social support, coping strategies, and professional counseling—including cognitive-behavioral therapy, EMDR, and positive psychology interventions—to enhance resilience and well-being. Finally, it calls for comprehensive legal, social, and policy measures to combat stigma, ensure rights protection, and foster the inclusion of transgender individuals, advocating a multidimensional approach to improving their psychosocial and economic lives.

## Introduction

Universal declaration of human rights stated that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”<sup>1</sup>. When it comes to transgender and some other vulnerable groups in our society, all these laws and rights become a mere paper work. As far as India is concerned, social isolation and discrimination are very high for transgender. Still many people in India do not know who are transgender, and the reason behind their transformation. So, somewhere in our past, the society labeled them as untouchables and sadly the stigma still continues. India has strong legal system where each category of people in the country gets separate consideration and privileges. For example, there are special laws for children, women, (domestic violence, ragging, child labor, abolition, reservation and education) corporate and industries, etc. In short, there exists such a myriad of laws and yet, quite ironically, Transgender are almost unaddressed by our legal system. United Nations (UN) has started an intensive campaign for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) people in 2011 and soon that has gained importance in

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various countries, including India. In fact, it is a social justice movement which emphasizes the social, economic and psychological well-being of Transgender.

## Who Is Transgender?

The term transgender is generally used to describe those who transgress social gender norms. Transgender is an umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity (sense of them as male or female) or gender expression differs from that usually associated with their birth sex. According to American Psychological Association<sup>2</sup>, anyone whose identity, appearance, or behavior falls outside of conventional gender norms can be described as transgender (APA, 2012)<sup>3</sup>. Biological females who wish to live and be recognized as men are called Female-To-Male (FTM) transsexuals or transsexual men. Biological males who wish to live and be recognized as women are called Male-To-Female (MTF) transsexuals or transsexual women. Many transgender people live part-time or full-time as members of the other gender. However, not everyone whose appearance or behavior is gender-atypical will identify as a transsexual person. Transsexuals usually seek medical interventions, such as hormone treatment and surgery, to make their bodies as congruent as possible with their preferred gender. The process of transitioning from one gender to the other is called sex reassignment or gender reassignment.

According to American Psychological Association (APA), the sex and gender have distinct meanings. Sex refers to biological status as male or female. It includes physical attributes such as sex chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones, internal reproductive structures, and external genitalia. Gender is a term that is often used to refer to ways that people act, react, or feel about themselves, which are associated with boys/men and girls/women. While aspects of biological sex are the same across different cultures, aspects of gender may not be<sup>4</sup>. People generally experience gender identity and sexual orientation as two different things. Sexual orientation defines the group of people in which one is likely to find the satisfying and fulfilling romantic relationships that are an essential component of personal identity for many people, it's more than a personal trait (American Psychological Association, 2008)<sup>5</sup>. Gender identity is one's sense of oneself as a woman or a man or both or neither (Meyerowitz, 2009)<sup>6</sup>. Sexual orientation refers to one's sexual attraction to men, women, both, or neither, whereas gender identity refers to one's sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender. Usually people who are attracted to women prior to transition continue to be attracted to women after transition, and people who are attracted to men prior to transition continue to be attracted to men after transition. That means, for example, a biological male who is attracted to females will be attracted to females after the transition, and the individual would be a lesbian. However, due to the cultural norms that have been set by the society, such sexual preferences and orientations are considered as wrong and undesirable.

Other major categories or terms related to this area are, androgynous - refers to someone whose gender identity is both male and female, or neither male nor female; and bi-gendered and gender queer - denoting or relating to a person who does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions but identifies with neither, both, or a combination of male and female genders<sup>7</sup>. According to Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) IV TR, the diagnostic criteria for Gender Identity disorder was feeling of persistent and strong cross gender identification and persistent discomfort with his/ her sex or sense appropriateness in the gender role of that sex. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association released the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) which replaced the outdated entry "Gender Identity Disorder" with Gender Dysphoria, and changed the criteria for diagnosis.

Gender Dysphoria is a feeling of unease and dissatisfaction with the biological sex one is born with, which results in anxiety, depression, restlessness, and other symptoms. The dysphoria often acts as a catalyst to change one's body and gender expression. The necessity of a psychiatric diagnosis remains controversial, as both psychiatric and medical authorities recommend individualized medical treatment

through hormones and/or surgeries to treat gender dysphoria. The removal of homosexuality as a mental disorder from the *DSM* in 1973 was seen as a clear assertion that a behavior should not be pathologized simply because it is not congruent with societal norms or preferences. Marmor<sup>8</sup> (1972) posited that “there is nothing ‘sick’ or ‘unnatural’ about homosexual object choice, except insofar as this preference represents a socially condemned form of behavior in our culture”<sup>9</sup>. Likewise, the changes in *DSM V* suggest that the problem is not the gender or identity, instead it is the incongruence between one’s experienced gender and assigned gender.

Transgender / transsexuals are not mentally ill and untouchables. In India, in the census of 2011, a decision was taken to count the transgender. Indirectly, this is an acceptance of transgender as human being, by our society. In India, there is an upward trend in crime against LGBT. And there are number of cases going as unreported.

### Transition from One Gender to Another

The transition from one gender to another is a significant part of the transgender individual's experience. Making decisions about transitioning, what level to transition, would the transition make the life complicated and miserable, and whether transgender would get needed support from family, friends and fellow beings? They can also wish not for complete transition, but assume an identity as “gender queer” or “third sex”. All are perfectly acceptable options. It can also be exciting and joyful to be able to act and move towards a more authentic self. But the transition is a period of anxiety and high amount of stress, mainly on expressing the emotions and convincing others as a man or woman (i.e. whether or not one will be “read” as transgendered).

### Biological- Hormonal Experiences

The sex hormones - the estrogens, progesterone, and the androgens — are a special category of steroids, released mostly by the gonads (testes and ovaries) and to a lesser extent by the adrenal glands. The androgens, which include testosterone, are male hormones and men have it in higher levels. The estrogens, which include estradiol, are female hormones because their level is higher in women. Progesterone, another predominantly female hormone, prepares the uterus for the implantation of a fertilized ovum and promotes the maintenance of pregnancy. Sex hormones affect the brain, the genitals, and other organs<sup>10</sup>.

Male and female behaviors differ because of sex hormones that activate particular genes. Certain genes on the X and Y chromosomes exert direct effects on brain development. Sexual differentiation begins with the chromosomes. A female mammal has two X chromosomes. A male has an X and a Y. During an early stage of prenatal development in mammals, both male and female have a set of Müllerian ducts and a set of Wolffian ducts, as well as primitive gonads (testes or ovaries). The Müllerian ducts degenerate in males, and the Wolffian ducts degenerate in females. These help in the development and growth of the gender-related organs and other biological mechanisms of human body. Some parts in our brain and its mechanisms also have a role in this matter. One area in the anterior hypothalamus, known as the sexually dimorphic nucleus, is larger in the male than in the female and contributes to control of male sexual behavior. Parts of the female hypothalamus can generate a cyclic pattern of hormone release, as in the human menstrual cycle<sup>11</sup>.

### Psychological Perspectives

Transgender are a psychologically vulnerable group due to all the stress and anxiety they experience throughout their lives. Most of the transgender leave their family when they realize their identity seems to be deviant from others expectations. Either they end up alone and unaided or they might join some groups such as *Hijaras*. Both these conditions put them at significant risk of developing severe psychological issues. Most commonly Transgender are susceptible to Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)<sup>12</sup>, Anxiety disorders<sup>13</sup> and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)<sup>14</sup>. Children get cues early on from

parents about gender appropriate behavior, and internalize them. For example, girls are expected to play with baby dolls whereas boys with cars and trucks. While most transgender individuals behave in ways that do not conform to expected gender roles during childhood, not all gender-nonconforming children grow into a transgender identity. However, gender-nonconforming children are subjected to harassment and violence at home and schools, regardless of whether they consider themselves transgender as adults. At puberty, the body begins to change and adapt gender specific features (breasts, changes in genitals, menses, etc.), and is considered a particularly hard age with stress and storm. Transgender individuals have difficulty to cope up with the bodily changes. Many transgender individuals are aware of their issues by this age, but they won't receive proper support from the society. These kinds of problems make them face traumatic events at a very early age in life. Moreover, these emotional and financial issues continue till early adulthood, and few among them bounce back from all the difficulties and work for the well-being of others. And few still stay stuck in their difficulties without anticipating a better life. Since, the society taught them to stand separate, they distance themselves from other people in situations like choosing where to stay (most of the transgender live at slums) or while in a public transport service.

### 2.3 Pre- and Post-Transition Period

There are a number of things Transgender people need to face in the pre- and post-transition periods. The pre-transition period would be totally filled with fear and anxiety as they anticipate the outcomes of the transition. First, a bundle of questions like what would be the reaction of family and friends? Would they accept, and if not what will they do further and so on would destroy their peace of mind. Second, fears about violence and prejudice when one is read as transgendered. Third, the frustration of dealing with the questions of society and finishing legal procedures (for e.g. identity proofs). Financial, emotional, social and psychological discomfort will affect the well-being of transgender. Post-transition period mainly deals with the satisfaction resulting from the transition and this determines the healthy future. In case the surgery does not bring satisfaction, it could gravely affect daily living and cause severe disappointment if the transition does not solve what it was intended to solve.

## Development of Learned Helplessness and its Progression

### Learned Helplessness

The concept suggested by Seligman<sup>15</sup>, which refers to the feeling of helplessness that develops after exposure to situations in which no effort succeeds in affecting the outcome. This concept developed in a classical experiment of learning with a dog. It develops in cases where no efforts help yield reinforcement or provide escape from negative events. After such experiences, both people and animals seem literally to give up. They tend to remain in a seemingly passive state and simply quit trying; subsequently, even if the situation changes so that some responses might work, they never discover this fact. Research on learned helplessness found that it begins partly from our perceptions of control - when we begin to believe that we have no control over our environment, our lives, we stop trying to improve our situation. However, not all people respond in the same way. A large number of studies have shown that even people whose early lives were ravaged by traumatic experiences such as early death of a parent or any loved one, divorced parents, war or extreme poverty and were likely to stay in the learned helplessness condition, often grow up optimistic and resilient. Apart from the situations and consequences, the interpretation of the negative events is one key aspect in developing learned helplessness.

People, in whom the effects of the trauma become ingrained, often develop a chronic sense of helplessness and victimization. The experience is so unexpected and overwhelming that the very foundations of a person's coping mechanism are challenged. If the victims already have tenuous control or if the stress persists, these can actively influence their destinies. Since intrusive experiencing is not under control of the person, the original experience of helplessness is reinforced. The major characteristics of learned helplessness contain lack of perceived control, lack of task involvement, and withdrawal

symptoms<sup>16</sup>. Transgender individual's life is loaded with so many problems which have been studied by scientists and social workers. They face social problems such as, prejudice and discrimination, stigmatization, and social exclusion. Another category of problems can be classified under legal paradigm such as, violation of rights-education, liberty, freedom and so many. And further, they tend to experience psychological problems such as anxiety, PTSD, depression and other psychiatric as well medical issues. They are surrounded with number of problems which in turn negatively affect their overall well-being.

An eminent American psychologist, Gordon Allport (1954) defined prejudice as antipathy based on faulty and inflexible generalization. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group as a whole or towards an individual because he is a group member<sup>17</sup>. Discrimination is the negative action towards vulnerable groups with intentional devaluing and that treats people unfairly because of their membership in a particular social group. Prejudice is the attitude and discrimination is the action or behavior. Discrimination is not the only after-effect but social exclusion is also a major by product. In the Joint Report on Social Inclusion, the European Commission and European Council (2004) defined social exclusion as a "process whereby certain individuals are pushed to the edge of society and prevented from participating fully by virtue of their poverty, or lack of basic competencies and lifelong learning opportunities, or as a result of discrimination"<sup>18</sup>. All the social issues and disparities are leading to the fundamental violation of the rights of transgender individuals. They have been purposefully denied from availing their fundamental rights as well as covertly suppressed by the out-group people/other individuals. Anxiety, depression and PTSD are the commonly seen psychological disorders in transgender. Along with that, unsafe sexual practices make them vulnerable to Sexually Transmitted Disorders (STDs) such as AIDS, Syphilis, Trichomoniasis, etc. The research evidences of Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC-Atlanta) shows, in New York City, from 2007-2011, there were 191 new diagnoses of HIV infection among transgender people, 99% of which were among transgender women. A review of studies of HIV infection in countries with data available for transgender people estimated that HIV prevalence for transgender women was nearly 50 times as high as for other adults of reproductive age<sup>19</sup>.

*"I had to keep changing my place due to the rejection and negative insight of my neighbors, and thereafter I stopped attempting to talk or ask for help to strangers or neighbors because I got a perception that nobody would listen to my words and instead, would only blame and insult me."*

This is a comment made by a MTF transgender individual. This is a learned response, wherein this particular MTF transgender and many more transgender individuals have made up in their minds that they are going to receive nothing good from the society. Hence, in their attempt to adjust with the society, they end up narrowing themselves. As a result, the positive emotions such as hope, confidence and optimism, which are very much necessary for a healthy life and well-being, tend to fade away and regrettably, helplessness gets learned over a period of time. *"Even none of the laws or officers protects us! The officers who are supposed to protect the rights and privileges of citizens misbehave with us. We fear to go to police station."* Transgender individuals are susceptible to victimization and re-victimization. A sense of hopelessness reflects a negative view of the future and self. This includes expectations of personal dissatisfaction, failure, and a continuation of pain and difficulty. They develop a belief that nothing will get better. Depressed individuals view themselves more negatively, their self-esteem suffers, and they have little or no self-confidence. They do not believe they have any control or that they can help themselves to feel better. They may have an urge to give up and think, "what's the use?"

The prevalence of suicide attempts among respondents to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS, US- 2014), conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and National Center for Transgender Equality, is 41 percent, which vastly exceeds the 4.6 percent of the overall U.S. population who report a lifetime suicide attempt, and is also higher than the 10-20 percent of lesbian, gay and bisexual

adults who report ever attempting suicide<sup>20</sup>. This is how the transgender develop learned helplessness over a period of time and result in severe psychiatric problems and at last lead to suicide/loss of life. Negative attitude and approach of society is the major cause for the development of learned helplessness in transgender.

## Inferences and Suggestion

### Social Support:

There is an urgent need to bring about public awareness and an attitudinal change in the minds and hearts of the people about Transgender. Transgender individuals often experience various forms of social exclusion in most important spaces of social life like family, employment and public space. In fact, they learn from their experiences that they are worthless, and so they stay away from the public. For example, in trains at Chennai and many metropolitan cities transgender individuals sit on the floor and travel. Similarly a transgender individual resides at slums or near slum areas. In the present society, only very small population of transgender is in the mainstream. Hence, there is an urgent need to develop and impart appropriate sensitivity training to bring about public awareness about inclusion of the sexual minorities and protection of their rights. A mere positive attitude of people can bring effective changes in their lives.

### Coping Skills:

The kind of traumas and isolation transgender individual experience would trigger the development of learned helplessness in them. As a result they lose the capacity to appreciate the connection between their actions and their abilities to influence further course of their lives. So, counseling and therapy could be used to inculcate within the qualities of a stress resilient person such as personal control, task involvement, adaptive lifestyle and active seeking of social support, etc. Researchers proved that problem-based/problem-oriented coping is healthier than emotion-based coping. Problem-oriented coping is always pro-active, which solves problems through actions and result-oriented behaviors. Practicing emotional self-regulation through continuous monitoring and feedback method could also help in overcoming the helplessness feeling.

### Counseling and Therapy:

Along with hormone therapy and other medical treatments, Psychological counseling and Psychotherapy are very much needed for transgender. An effective counseling plan and procedure need to be prepared by the counselor/therapist. Initial stages of counseling are meant for evaluation of the client (transgender) and rapport building. This is followed by gender assessment and then the Therapist should guide the client to develop a mental health care plan. A therapist/ Counselor should assess the client and track the person's growth of well-being and equip the client to reach the fullest potential.

Treatment options may include psychotherapeutic techniques (e.g., cognitive-behavioral therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing), pharmacotherapy, and social or advocacy interventions. If the client intends to start or stop hormones while undergoing pharmacologic treatment for mental health concerns, medication may need to be re-evaluated as part of this process. Potential interactions between hormones and psychoactive medications should be carefully evaluated by the prescribing physician, and regular visits scheduled to monitor for psychological de-compensation<sup>21</sup>. Studies show that different kinds of therapy have been used for Transgender individual, but most commonly Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Eye Movement Desensitization Therapy (EMDR) is another therapy found to be very effective for traumatic events. Transgender individuals are vulnerable to various kinds of trauma from childhood onwards and so, EMDR could be an effective treatment for their well-being. In addition, Positive Psychology Therapy and activities could be used to inculcate positive psychological qualities in transgender such as hope, optimism, resilience self-efficacy and creativity. Positive psychology is a multi-dimensional construct, which comprise of many constructs that contributes

to overall well-being of individuals and helps to overcome adverse situations (Seligman 2000)<sup>22</sup>. Once they have dealt with the emotional issues and stressors, life skills training need to be given as precautionary measure. Similarly, Assertive Training, Occupational Therapy, Workplace Counseling, Career Guidance and Personality Enrichment Training can be given. The state should provide educational and employment opportunities to these people. All treatments and therapies should address the overall issues of transgender and more importantly, activities should happen at the root cause level to eradicate the discrimination.

## Conclusion

The feeling of learned helplessness seldom contributes to a better life for the transgender. The gradual development of learned helplessness in transgender is the by-product of many things such as, socioeconomic disparity of our society, prejudiced attitude and discriminative behaviors, poor availing of legal aids, and victimization and re-victimization etc. Definitely, the psychosocial well-being of transgender gets badly affected by these stereotypes and mental traumatic events from childhood to the end of their lives. Here the paper tried to explain about the development of learned helplessness in transgender, which hinder the human growth. Being helpless is a learned response resulting from life experiences. The negative experience makes people pessimistic, which take life into a miserable condition. This is obvious in the case of transgender. Many among transgender like to live healthy life like any human being in the world. But, once others understand that they are deviant from the conventional gender norms, the society starts to ill-treat them. Hence, it is a history of learned helplessness which starts at childhood and continue till death. Supreme Court of India had given third gender status for "hijras" and transgender. Earlier, they were forced to write male or female against their gender. Such a positive change, being brought about in India, is certainly applaudable, but still a lot needs to be done for Transgender. There is a need to track their well-being in all levels and spheres. Stigma, Discrimination and other socio-economic hurdles suffered by Transgender can be resolved through comprehensive and integrated measures of law and policy, scientific and systematic measures, and which shall be conceived, organized and enforced through proper measures. Those measures shall help us to change the livelihood of transgender considerably.

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11. Ibid
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