



A Sociological Study on the Discrimination Experienced by Transgender Individuals When Accessing Public Health Services

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Transgender Individuals When Accessing Public Health
Services**

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Abstract

This research investigates the pervasive gaps existing within Sri Lanka's healthcare facilities for transgender individuals, and explores the discrimination and challenges they face when accessing public health services. Discrimination significantly impedes basic healthcare access of transgender individuals, affecting not only general health services but also specialized critical support services such as HIV care and gender-affirming medical services. Chronic stress experienced by transgender individuals due to societal exclusion compounds the situation, resulting in disproportionately lower emotional wellness and heightened mental health concerns among the community, including anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Utilizing a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 transgender individuals, delineating their experiences within the healthcare system. Findings unveiled widespread denial of general health services, instances of misgendering, and exposure to judgment and discrimination within healthcare settings. Limited access to hormone therapy compounded by the scarcity of estrogen for male-to-female transgender individuals, in contrast to the relatively ready availability of testosterone shots for female-to-male individuals, highlighted systemic disparities. Transgender individuals also faced discomfort and avoidance of healthcare due to the lack of knowledge and insensitivity of healthcare staff toward transgender issues. Furthermore, access to counseling and gender-affirming surgeries within public health institutions was marred by discrimination and abuse, perpetuating the transgender community's marginalization. Therefore, this study serves as a vital contribution to the local research literature, addressing the critical gaps and advocating for a more inclusive and informed healthcare approach for the currently marginalized transgender community in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: accessibility to services, body modification surgeries/sex reassignment surgeries, chest or breast reconstruction surgeries, discrimination, gender identity/expression, genital surgeries, hormone therapy, social stigma, transgender identity

Introduction

In Sri Lanka, the transgender community faces a myriad of challenges when attempting to access healthcare services. These difficulties reflect broader societal issues, including conservative thinking patterns, sex stereotyping, and other specific forms of discrimination, particularly marginalization and exclusion based on gender identity. This paper aims to illuminate the gaps in healthcare facilities available to transgender individuals in Sri Lanka, outlining systemic discrimination, limited access to basic healthcare, and the resulting psychological, emotional, and physical implications for this marginalized community.

Transgender individuals are those whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. This spectrum includes a diverse range of identities where a person's innate sense of their gender does not align with societal expectations based on their biological sex. Some transgender individuals may transition socially, medically, or both, to affirm their gender identity. This transition can involve various elements, such as changes in clothing, name, and, for some, medical interventions like hormone therapy or surgeries. It is essential to recognize that transgender people encompass a wide range of identities and experiences, and their journey of self-identification and affirmation is deeply personal and unique to each individual (American Psychological Association, 2020). Only very recently have Sri Lankan scholars commenced researching on transgender health issues. Therefore, understanding and addressing the challenges faced by the transgender community within the country's healthcare framework is crucial. This study seeks to bridge this gap by conducting a detailed analysis of the discriminatory barriers and structural challenges faced by transgender individuals when seeking healthcare services in Sri Lanka. By shedding light on these barriers, this research

aims to advocate for improved healthcare access and the establishment of inclusive practices within the Sri Lankan healthcare system.

Transgender individuals in Sri Lanka encounter numerous and multifaceted challenges in accessing adequate healthcare services, reflecting broader systemic discrimination prevalent within the healthcare system (Fernando & Perera, 2019; Gunasekara et al., 2020). This marginalized community experiences a spectrum of discrimination, ranging from denial of general health services to misgendering and judgment based on their gender identity or expression (De Silva, 2018). Often, trans individuals are referred to according to their sex assigned at birth rather than their affirmed gender, perpetuating feelings of stigma and disrespect within healthcare settings. This discriminatory treatment not only violates their dignity but also obstructs their access to essential healthcare support.

This type of discrimination extends to healthcare settings where transgender individuals are often misgendered or referred to according to their sex assigned at birth, a practice that denies their affirmed gender identity (Fernando & Perera, 2019). Misgendering not only violates their dignity but also leads to the denial of basic healthcare services and fosters discriminatory behaviors within healthcare settings.

The limited availability of gender-affirming healthcare services further compounds the challenges faced by transgender individuals in Sri Lanka (Perera, 2017). Female-to-male (FTM) individuals often have access to testosterone shots through psychiatric clinics in general hospitals, but do encounter certain limitations. Meanwhile, male-to-female (MTF) individuals often face barriers in obtaining estrogen, a critical component of their gender-affirming treatment (Samara & Bandara, 2018). Thus, the

scarcity of accessible gender-affirming services adversely impacts their health and well-being.

The compound effects of discrimination and limited healthcare access contribute to high levels of chronic stress among transgender individuals in Sri Lanka. This chronic stress is linked to social exclusion and results in disproportionately lower emotional wellness and heightened mental health issues, including anxiety and suicidal ideation. The lack of sensitive mental healthcare exacerbates these challenges, restricting counseling opportunities and compounding the psychological distress experienced within the community.

Access to gender-affirming healthcare, a critical aspect of transgender individuals' well-being, remains significantly restricted in Sri Lanka. The scarcity of gender-affirming services for medical transition, including hormone therapy, chest or breast reconstruction surgeries, and other body modification surgeries, poses significant challenges. Female-to-male (FTM) individuals are often provided testosterone shots through psychiatric clinics in general hospitals, while male-to-female (MTF) individuals face a scarcity of accessible estrogen and are advised to resort to alternatives like contraceptive medication that may pose health risks. Such disparities in access to hormone therapy exacerbate the health concerns faced by the transgender community.

In Sri Lanka, the dominance of patriarchal norms significantly impacts the experiences of transgender individuals. Male dominance in the social, economic, and political spheres creates a rigid gender hierarchy that marginalizes those who do not conform to traditional gender roles. This entrenched patriarchy not only reinforces the binary understanding of gender but also exacerbates the discrimination and violence faced by transgender people. As a result, transgender individuals often struggle with

limited access to resources, lack of social acceptance, and absence of legal protections.

Moreover, the implications of discrimination within healthcare profoundly impact the mental health of transgender individuals in Sri Lanka (Ranasinghe & Dias, 2021). Studies indicate elevated levels of chronic stress, leading to disproportionately low emotional wellness and increased mental health concerns such as anxiety and suicidal ideation among this community (Perera & Gunawardena, 2020). The limited access to sensitive mental healthcare and counseling further exacerbates the psychological distress experienced by a majority of the transgender community (Gunasekara et al., 2020).

The dearth of comprehensive research dedicated to understanding and addressing the challenges faced by transgender individuals within Sri Lanka's healthcare system underlines the necessity for in-depth investigations in the area (Fernando & Perera, 2019). This research aims to fill this gap by shedding light on the systemic barriers impeding healthcare access for transgender individuals (De Silva, 2018). Through qualitative analysis that examines firsthand experiences within healthcare settings, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the discrimination, the limitations in access to essential medical support, and the implications for health and well-being faced by the transgender community in Sri Lanka.

To sum up, the challenges faced by transgender individuals in accessing healthcare services in Sri Lanka encompass systemic discrimination, limited access to gender-affirming services, and profound implications for their mental health. A comprehensive investigation into these challenges is essential to advocate for a more inclusive and responsive

healthcare framework that caters to the unique needs of the transgender community in Sri Lanka.

Limited existing research on transgender health issues in Sri Lanka necessitates an in-depth exploration to understand the dimensions of discrimination and challenges faced by this marginalized community. This study seeks to fill this critical gap in the literature by offering a comprehensive examination of the structural barriers impeding the healthcare access of transgender individuals. This sociological study investigating the discrimination faced by transgender individuals within public health services has substantial significance within the field. By analyzing the multifaceted forms of discrimination encountered by transgender individuals seeking healthcare, this research illuminates the intricate interplay between societal norms, institutional biases, and healthcare access. It sheds light on the structural inequalities and systemic barriers deeply embedded within the healthcare landscape, reflecting broader social prejudices and institutional practices that hinder transgender individuals' access to gender-affirming care. Furthermore, the study underscores the sociocultural complexities surrounding gender identity and healthcare, emphasizing the social construction of gender norms, the impact of stigma, and the institutional failures contributing to a marginalized healthcare experience. Through sociological inquiry, this study offers critical insights into the social, cultural, and structural factors that perpetuate discrimination within public health services, facilitating a better understanding of the broader societal implications and the urgent need for systemic changes to foster an inclusive and equitable healthcare environment for transgender individuals.

In the subsequent sections, this paper will delve deeper into the methodologies employed to study these discriminatory practices, the

firsthand experiences shared by transgender individuals in healthcare settings, and the implications of these discriminatory practices for their health and well-being.

Research Methodology

This study implemented a qualitative research design aimed at exploring the discrimination encountered by transgender individuals when accessing public health services in Sri Lanka. The selection of a qualitative approach stemmed from its ability to delve deeply into individuals' experiences and perspectives concerning discrimination within healthcare settings, offering a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges experienced by transgender individuals within the Sri Lankan healthcare system.

The study engaged a sample of 20 participants, equally divided between female-to-male (FTM) and male-to-female (MTF) transgender individuals. These participants were purposively selected based on their accessibility and willingness to engage in in-depth interviews centered on their encounters within Sri Lankan public healthcare settings.

Data collection relied primarily on in-depth interviews, providing participants with the opportunity to freely and extensively share their experiences. These interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, ensuring flexibility for participants to elaborate on their encounters within healthcare facilities. To ensure accuracy in capturing participants' experiences, the research utilized audio-recording and the meticulous taking of field notes throughout the interview process.

Thematic analysis served as the primary method for interpreting the qualitative data obtained from the interviews. This approach facilitated the systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of recurrent

patterns and themes within the interview transcripts. It involved several iterative stages, ensuring a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of participants' experiences.

Ethical considerations were considered to be of paramount importance throughout the research process. Informed consent was diligently obtained from all participants, emphasizing the voluntary nature of their participation and ensuring their anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were thoroughly informed about the research objectives, their rights to withdraw from the study at any point, and the meticulous and secure handling of their data to maintain confidentiality.

The research team also took extensive measures to establish rapport and trust with the participants, ensuring a safe environment for sharing sensitive and personal experiences. Furthermore, continuous reflexivity among the researchers was maintained, acknowledging personal biases and preconceptions throughout the study, and taking steps to mitigate their influence on data collection and analysis.

Moreover, the research methodology incorporated member checking, a process involving the verification of findings by participants, to enhance the credibility and validity of the study results. This iterative review allowed participants to validate the accuracy and authenticity of the interpretations made utilizing their shared experiences, further reinforcing the credibility of the research outcomes.

Research Findings

The narratives and shared experiences of transgender individuals in Sri Lanka unveil a multi-dimensional tapestry of challenges, bringing to light the pervasive discrimination and formidable barriers existing within public health settings. These findings underscore the pressing need for

significant systemic changes to establish a more inclusive and accessible healthcare system that caters to the unique requirements of the transgender community.

Unpreparedness/ limitations of the colonial nature of General Health Services

Transgender individuals recounted distressing and recurring incidents of being misgendered and denied general health services based on their assigned sex at birth. Trans women consistently faced the distressing reality of being referred to as men within healthcare settings, while trans men often encountered being overlooked or mislabeled. These instances perpetuated judgment and discrimination, creating a climate of marginalization and discomfort for transgender individuals. Moreover, the existence of sex-segregated hospital wards and clinics exacerbated these challenges, amplifying feelings of exclusion and unease within these environments.

I am a female-to-male transgender individual. I get testosterone hormone shots from the General Hospital, where the attendants provide me with the medicine. Every day, a woman asks me, 'Why are you like this? What a beautiful girl you are.' While she speaks with what seems like sympathy, her words make me feel like a failure as a man. (Female to Male trans Individual A: Field Data, 2021).

The denial of general health services perpetuates a cycle of discrimination, denying transgender individuals access to essential medical care. Being misgendered not only violates the dignity of trans individuals

but obstructs their access to healthcare, leading, very often, to avoidance of seeking care, resulting in neglected health concerns and worsening well-being.

Challenges in Accessing Gender-Affirming Healthcare Services

The findings highlighted a significant gap in accessing gender-affirming healthcare services, particularly concerning hormone therapies. Male-to-female transgender individuals faced substantial hurdles in acquiring estrogen due to its severe shortage in Sri Lanka and alternatives like "Mithuri Tablets (contraceptive tablets)" were utilized, leading to health risks and, at times, discriminatory behavior from healthcare staff.

Conversely, while female-to-male individuals could more easily obtain testosterone shots through psychiatric clinics in general hospitals, though certain limitations persisted. However, even when hormones were unavailable in general hospitals, testosterone was available, at a price, on the black market.

I am a male-to-female transgender individual. In Sri Lanka, estrogen isn't readily available; instead, we're advised to take high doses of 'Mithuri' tablets. The long-term effects on our bodies remain unknown due to this substitute. Despite its unavailability in dispensaries, testosterone can even be found on the black market. (Male to Female trans Individual B: Field Data, 2021).

The challenges in accessing gender-affirming healthcare perpetuate significant health concerns and contribute to the worsening of mental and physical well-being among transgender individuals. The absence of

accessible hormone therapies poses severe health risks and further exacerbates the marginalization experienced within healthcare settings.

Discomfort and Stigmatization in Healthcare Settings

Transgender individuals expressed significant discomfort in exposing their bodies and disclosing their transgender identity within healthcare environments. This discomfort arose primarily from the lack of knowledge and understanding among healthcare providers regarding transgender-related issues. The requirement to expose their bodies to medical professionals who lacked sensitivity induced anxiety and unease, often resulting in the avoidance of seeking care or receiving inadequate attention to their health concerns.

I am a male-to-female transsexual. I've undergone breast implant surgery. But I haven't yet had the surgery to change my genitals, so I am a woman who is still living with male genitals. I've had a very negative experience when I went urgently to an unfamiliar place to obtain medication. Sri Lanka has very regressive attitudes regarding these matters. (Male to Female trans Individual A: Field Data, 2021).

The discomfort and stigmatization experienced in healthcare settings lead to a pervasive fear of seeking medical assistance and disclosing one's transgender identity. The lack of sensitivity and awareness among healthcare providers exacerbates mental health challenges and hinders the overall well-being of transgender individuals.

Limited Access to Counseling and Support

Restricted access to counseling and mental health support emerged as a crucial concern within the transgender community. The findings highlighted that these essential services were predominantly accessible to those with financial means, restricting broader access for the transgender population. The absence of inclusive and readily available mental health support compounded the already significant mental health challenges experienced by many transgender individuals.

In Sri Lanka, there is no available free counseling service for the LGBTQ community, particularly for the transgender community, despite significant societal and familial pressures. Unfortunately, depression among young transgender individuals is common. I've heard about a private counseling service for LGBT individuals at Durdans Hospital, but regrettably, not everyone has access to it.”
(Male to Female trans Individual I: Field Data, 2021).

This limited access to mental health support leads to exacerbated mental health concerns within the transgender community. The lack of inclusive counseling perpetuates the distress and isolation experienced by transgender individuals, further deteriorating their overall well-being.

Discrimination in Accessing Body Modification Surgeries

Despite the provision of body modification surgeries in government hospitals, accessing these procedures was fraught with discrimination and prejudice. Transgender individuals face psychological and physical abuse within healthcare settings when seeking sex reassignment surgery or other

body modification procedures, signaling the prevalence of deeply ingrained transphobia within these institutions.

I prefer not to disclose the hospital's name. I was admitted for my breast removal. During my time at the hospital, I chose not to disclose my transgender identity to the health staff due to the negative stigma attached to it. They view it as an anomaly or mistake. A friend of mine also had a similar experience. I acted as though I were a breast cancer patient who was prescribed to remove my breast, just to avoid unwanted attention.” (Female to male trans Individual C: Field Data, 2021).

The discrimination and prejudice faced by transgender individuals when attempting to access body modification surgeries intensify mental health concerns and deter them from seeking essential medical procedures. The transphobia ingrained within healthcare settings exacerbates feelings of marginalization and isolation within the community.

Legal and Policy Barriers

Beyond healthcare settings, the research also highlighted legal and policy barriers that further constrained the rights and well-being of the transgender community. Existing laws and policies often fail to address the unique challenges faced by transgender individuals, leading to legal discrimination, inadequate protection, and limited recognition of their gender identity. This legal framework contributes significantly to systemic marginalization and impedes the community's access to essential rights and services.

I am a trans guy. While I was in school, I had a relationship with a girl who is also my best friend. When her mother discovered our relationship, she reported it to the police. I was subjected to humiliation when the police insisted on my removing my school uniform to prove my gender identity. They treated me with disrespect, as if I were a mental patient. This incident is something I will never forget. (Female to Male trans Individual D: Field Data, 2021).

The prevalent legal and policy barriers perpetuate the vulnerability and marginalization of the transgender community. The lack of adequate legal protections further exacerbates the discrimination and challenges faced within various levels of society, contributing to a cycle of exclusion and limited access to rights and services.

Social Exclusion and Economic Challenges

The narratives shared by transgender individuals revealed pervasive social exclusion and economic challenges. The societal stigma and discrimination experienced often lead to exclusion from educational and employment opportunities, forcing many transgender individuals into marginalized and vulnerable economic circumstances. This cycle of social exclusion and economic challenges further perpetuates the difficulties faced by the transgender community in accessing adequate healthcare and essential services.

Transgender children typically begin facing issues at home around the ages of 16 to 17, which aligns with my own experience. In my case, despite our parents having money,

once I started living true to my identity, withholding financial support became one of their forms of punishment. Fortunately, my transgender friends provided essential financial assistance. We are part of an organization that supports us, offering help in various ways. I secured a job through this organization, allowing me to earn some money. A hormone shot costs 500 rupees. It should be taken in the first week of every month. That's how the money was earned.” (Female to Male trans Individual G: Field Data, 2021).

The social exclusion and economic challenges faced deepen the vulnerability of the transgender community, hindering their access to education, employment, and essential services. The marginalization experienced within society results in limited economic opportunities as well, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and hardship within the community.

Cultural and Familial Rejection

Cultural and familial rejection emerged as significant factors impacting the mental health and overall well-being of transgender individuals. Many narratives recounted the distressing experiences of being ostracized by families or communities due to their gender identity. This rejection often leads to heightened mental health concerns, including anxiety and depression, and a lack of familial support, exacerbating their challenges in seeking and receiving adequate healthcare.

Cultural and familial rejection intensifies the mental health challenges faced by transgender individuals. The lack of familial support and acceptance leads to increased feelings of isolation and distress within

the community, hindering transgender individuals' overall well-being and ability to access necessary healthcare services.

It's rare to find transgender individuals within our families who haven't faced physical abuse. We endure immense suffering and anguish until we eventually leave our homes. Often, we live in a hostile environment even among our own family members. (Female to Male trans Individual H: Field Data, 2021).

The research revealed that transgender individuals in Sri Lanka face systematic discrimination, denial of general health services, limited access to gender-affirming treatments, and pervasive discomfort in healthcare settings due to stigma and lack of awareness. These challenges significantly impact their access to necessary healthcare and contribute to mental health struggles within the community. The findings further exposed the distressing experiences of discrimination, harassment, and transphobic responses faced by individuals seeking body modification surgeries.

Results and Discussion

This comprehensive examination of the experiences of transgender individuals within Sri Lankan public health services has illuminated a spectrum of challenges, discrimination, and formidable barriers in accessing adequate care. These findings highlight the pressing need for an inclusive, sensitive, and culturally-aware healthcare environment designed to accommodate and address the unique needs of the transgender community within the socio-cultural landscape of Sri Lanka.

Cultural Barriers in Healthcare Access for Transgender Individuals in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka, like many other societies, exhibits deeply ingrained traditional gender roles and binary perceptions, heavily influencing its cultural norms and value systems. Within this context, societal adherence to these established norms contributes significantly to the denial or limitation of general health services for transgender individuals. The prevalence of misgendering and the denial of care based on assigned sex at birth are intricately woven into the fabric of cultural beliefs. Addressing these systemic challenges within the healthcare system requires a holistic approach that encompasses both policy adjustments and cultural sensitivity. Integrating cultural awareness and education within healthcare practices is paramount to bridge the gap between traditional norms and diverse gender identities within the community.

The intersection of cultural norms, societal expectations, and healthcare practices creates significant barriers for transgender individuals seeking access to essential health services in Sri Lanka. Deeply ingrained traditional gender roles and binary perceptions influence both the availability and quality of care provided to transgender people. These cultural barriers manifest in various forms, from the denial of general health services to limited access to gender-affirming care and body modification surgeries. Understanding and addressing these barriers require a culturally sensitive approach that not only challenges existing stereotypes but also integrates respect for diverse gender identities into healthcare policies and practices. The following sections explore the different forms of cultural barriers that impede equitable healthcare access for the transgender community.

Access to Gender-Affirming Healthcare Services and Cultural Barriers

Cultural perceptions and values play a significant role in the limitations faced in accessing gender-affirming healthcare services. Deeply embedded stereotypes and societal norms may act as barriers, hindering equitable access to hormone therapies for transgender individuals. The scarcity of estrogen for male-to-female transgender individuals could potentially be influenced by cultural norms shaping the understanding of gender identity within Sri Lankan society. Similarly, the relatively ready availability and provision of testosterone for female-to-male individuals might be rooted in societal perceptions of gender roles. To create a more inclusive healthcare environment, policies must evolve to encompass a culturally sensitive approach to healthcare provision, ensuring that medical necessity aligns with cultural understanding.

Cultural Stigmatization and Discomfort in Healthcare Settings

Cultural stigmatization, rigid norms and hide-bound traditions could amplify the discomfort experienced by transgender individuals within healthcare settings. Traditional values and societal expectations may lead to discomfort and unease among transgender individuals when disclosing their gender identity, particularly if cultural values conflict with their self-identified gender. This discomfort, deeply rooted in cultural expectations, underscores the need for cultural sensitivity training among healthcare providers. Mitigating the cultural gap within healthcare systems involves fostering an inclusive environment where diverse gender identities are respected and acknowledged, and developing healthcare services that are adapted to the unique needs of the transgender community.

Limited Access to Counseling and Cultural Factors

Cultural factors often intersect with economic constraints, limiting transgender individuals' access to mental health support. Stigma around non-conforming gender identities within certain cultural contexts might even deter individuals from seeking mental health services. Therefore, understanding cultural influences on mental health-seeking behaviors is crucial. Moreover, providing culturally sensitive counseling and support services is essential to break through these barriers.

Discrimination in Accessing Body Modification Surgeries and Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural biases and societal norms significantly impact access to body modification surgeries. Prevailing cultural perceptions of gender may lead to discriminatory practices within healthcare settings. Fostering cultural sensitivity and awareness among medical professionals is crucial to provide safe and inclusive surgical procedures for transgender individuals.

Interpreting the Results Related to Cultural Context

Interpreting these findings within the existing cultural context underscores the need for an inclusive healthcare framework that respects and integrates cultural diversity. Addressing cultural barriers within healthcare systems, ensuring inclusivity, and cultivating a culturally sensitive approach are fundamental to creating an affirming healthcare environment for the transgender community in Sri Lanka.

In conclusion, aligning healthcare practices with cultural understanding is crucial in providing more inclusive and sensitive services. Integrating cultural sensitivity within policy reforms and healthcare

practices is pivotal for creating an affirming healthcare environment for transgender individuals in Sri Lanka.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Systemic disparities within the healthcare sector can significantly impact marginalized groups such as transgender individuals, exacerbating the challenges they already face. In the context of Sri Lanka, these disparities perpetuate the marginalization and discrimination experienced by the transgender community. The lack of inclusive policies and specific healthcare services tailored to the needs of transgender individuals results in restricted access to essential care. This exclusion often leads to a myriad of adverse consequences. Firstly, the absence of gender-affirming healthcare services directly impacts the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of transgender individuals. Without access to hormone therapies, counseling, and necessary medical procedures, individuals may experience heightened distress, psychological strain, and, in some instances, severely deteriorating physical health. Secondly, the discriminatory practices and misgendering within healthcare settings not only violate the dignity of transgender individuals but also inhibit their access to fundamental healthcare support. These disparities, stemming from systemic inadequacies, and the underdeveloped nature of medical facilities and healthcare systems in the country, perpetuate a cycle of exclusion, impacting the overall health and quality of life of the marginalized transgender community in Sri Lanka. Rectifying these disparities by implementing inclusive policies, providing specific healthcare services, and ensuring education and training for healthcare providers is crucial to mitigate these negative impacts and foster an

environment that is equitable for and supportive of all individuals, regardless of their gender identity.

Moreover, the binary gender norms entrenched in Sri Lankan society significantly impact the physical and psychological well-being of transgender individuals. The rigid adherence to traditional gender roles often leads to a lack of recognition and acceptance of gender diversity, thereby creating a hostile environment for individuals who do not conform to these norms. This societal pressure to fit within the binary constructs of male and female leads to substantial stress and mental health challenges for transgender individuals. The absence of acknowledgment and validation of diverse gender identities within the cultural framework of Sri Lanka contributes to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression among the transgender community. Furthermore, the pressure to conform to societal expectations regarding physical appearance and gender expression may result in heightened distress and can lead to body dysphoria, negatively impacting their mental health. The disparity between their authentic gender identity and societal expectations not only affects their psychological well-being but also creates obstacles in accessing gender-affirming healthcare, thus exacerbating the overall well-being and health outcomes for transgender individuals in Sri Lanka. Addressing these norms and fostering a more inclusive and affirming environment is crucial in alleviating the psychological and physical burden experienced by the transgender community.

This extensive exploration into the challenges faced by transgender individuals accessing healthcare services in Sri Lanka has uncovered a complex web of discrimination, barriers, and societal challenges. It is evident that systemic changes are urgently needed in healthcare policies,

provider training, and societal attitudes to cultivate an environment that is truly inclusive and supportive of the transgender community.

Implications and Broader Context

The implications of this study extend far beyond individual experiences, highlighting entrenched systemic and societal issues. Structural biases within healthcare, stemming from institutional and sociocultural factors, form barriers that limit access to adequate healthcare for transgender individuals. These biases manifest in policies, legal frameworks, and healthcare systems, perpetuating discrimination, limited provision of services, and hindering the receipt of gender-affirming care. The stigmatization faced by transgender individuals within healthcare settings results from societal prejudices and lack of understanding, influencing doctor-patient relationships and impeding appropriate care. Lack of training among healthcare staff exacerbates mistreatment and inadequate care, emphasizing the crucial need for education and sensitivity training. Intersectionality further complicates the negative experience for marginalized transgender individuals, combining discrimination with other societal challenges, and thus worsening health disparities. Advancing towards an inclusive and affirming healthcare system will not only enhance the health and well-being of transgender individuals but will also foster societal progress by promoting inclusivity and reducing healthcare disparities. In this process, advocacy and policy changes will play a pivotal role in challenging discriminatory structures and reshaping healthcare access, drawing from successful strategies implemented in other contexts to advocate for a more equitable and compassionate healthcare landscape.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study serves as a clarion call for change, advocating for a healthcare system that respects, includes, and supports the diverse needs of the transgender community. Addressing the discriminatory practices, stigma, and barriers faced by transgender individuals in healthcare is a crucial step toward establishing a more equitable and compassionate society.

By implementing the suggested reforms and fostering a culture of acceptance and support, Sri Lanka can potentially create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for the transgender community, setting an example for the region and the world.

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