

In a trans

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Highlights

4 out of 5 adult transgenders in Bengaluru's rural areas suffer from mental illness, according to a study 'Healthcare denied to gender-nonconforming persons'

According to a study conducted by a city based psychiatrist on transgenders aged between 18 and 50 years around Bengaluru, about 76.6% of the population was found to have some form of psychiatric illness.

Among 60 participants, 46 (76.6%) were found with psychiatric morbidity. Out of the 46 persons, 16 individuals (26.7%) had substance use disorder, 10 (16.7%) had alcohol dependence, and six (10%) had non-alcoholic substance-use disorders, involving cannabis, benzodiazepines and cocaine.

Moreover, 10 (16.7%) individuals were diagnosed with depression, four suffered from dysthymia, 11 exhibited signs of adjustment disorder, three had anxiety disorder and two individuals suffered from insomnia.

That means, about four out of five adult transgenders in Bengaluru's rural areas suffer from mental illness.

Experts BM spoke to said the social stigma surrounding the community makes them more vulnerable to psychiatric morbidity.

"There is a pervasive stigma in society towards transgenders. Many individuals we interacted with for our study were from well-to-do families but were still not accepted. While we have a Transgender Rights Law in place, the community goes through a lot of hardship. Facing backlash right from an early age is difficult to cope with. This is one of the reasons there is high psychiatric morbidity among this population," said Dr Ume Hani, author of the

study and a practicing psychiatrist.

According to mental healthcare experts, although accessing healthcare is a fundamental human right, it is often denied to transgender and gender-nonconforming people. They usually have a very high tendency of postponing medical care when injured or sick.

“The community has to face health disparity even for regular health check-ups. This may be due to refusal of care, discrimination, or inability to afford it, violence, harassment, and lack of provider knowledge about transgenders. Thus, getting mental health support is out of the question. This puts the transgender population at high-risk, making them vulnerable to various physical and psychiatric morbidities,” said Dr Hani.

Lack of employment, family support and financial security contribute to stress; these difficulties force them to often depend on others for their livelihood. This also makes them vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination, and sexual and physical abuse.

“There is a lot of stress and frustration that members of our community face on a daily basis. Many of us are well-qualified but are without white collared jobs. This situation forces us to either beg at traffic signals or work as commercial sex workers. We face a lot of harassment too. The economic hardship we face leaves us stressed and worn out,” said Rekha*, a transgender from Hoskote.

According to Dr Hani, shortage of employment, stigma at the workplace, lack of qualification due to education status, fear of being embarrassed about identity, and experiencing an adverse job outcome, such as being fired, not being hired, or a promotion denied because of being transgender are some other issues that kept the individuals part of the study under tremendous stress.

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— Dr Ume Hani, psychiatrist, author of study

“About 75% of our study group was unemployed. There are various factors leading to unemployment among this population. Our study found that about 65% of individuals belonged to the lower socioeconomic strata; even though they have the potential, they are not accepted or offered jobs. Moreover, lack of family support and financial sources further contribute to stress,” Dr Hani told BM.

As this population is at higher risk of developing other psychiatric problems, experts are of the view that regular screening and timely intervention are needed to prevent or treat psychiatric co-morbidities.

“Educating people and sensitising them towards mental health and this community is important. When it comes to transgenders, this stigma doubles up. If we start educating and sensitising children at a younger age, things will be easy for them. We must understand that they are part of our society and should be treated well,” added Dr Hani.

(*name changed)