

MAJOR CONCERNS OF TRANSGENDER EMPLOYEES IN KOCHI METRO TRAIN SERVICE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Sibi K I

Asst. Professor in Sociology,
Sacred Heart College (Autonomous)
Thevara, Kochi, Kerala.

Introduction

Being one of the most marginalized and stigmatized section of our society the transgender community continues to confront grave problems and challenges in their struggle for existence. They have been “non-citizens” until very recently, lacking legal recognition and identification. The effects of this have been devastating for the community. Social and economic benefits are not available to them, neither are they able to participate in any political or socio-economic process which requires an officially endorsed identity. It is quite ironical that the untold miserable living conditions and issues of these people are not adequately addressed even today by the enlightened and educated society where the so called ‘gender justice’, ‘gender equality’ and ‘gender empowerment’ movements and programmes take place large in number.

However, the state of Kerala etched (in 2015) its name in history for framing and implementing a much-awaited Transgender Policy, a first of its kind, envisaging to end the societal stigma towards the sexual minority group and ensure them non-discriminatory treatment as well as equal growth opportunities. As a part of transgender empowerment policy, the Kerala government has made an admirable decision to employ transgender people in the Kochi Metro Rail Service which was officially inaugurated by the Prime Minister on 17-06-17. Kochi Metro Rail Limited (KMRL) introduced Kochi metro initially moving from Alwaye to Palarivattom. A majority of its workforce comprises of women. Kochi Metro is the first State-owned company to give employment to a large number of transgender people. They have been hired and placed in different operations ranging from ticketing to maintenance in various departments of the metro stations. As per the decision taken by the authorities, 60 vacancies have been reserved for the transgender community. As an initial step, 23 transgender were hired. It was a path breaking decision ever taken by a government. "We asked for 60 transgender people. We have appointed 23 till now and they are being trained for various functions including ticketing, customer relations and housekeeping, depending on their skills, qualifications," said Rashmi CR, who is representing Kochi Metro Rail Limited, a partnership venture between government of India and the state government.

"I just can't hold my excitement. All of us who have been trained to work at the Metro stations hope that we will get respect and love from our employers, passengers and co-workers. We will be busting stereotypes," said a transgender in an interview with NDTV anticipates that work options like these would help change people's perception and the way they are treated. "At a time when transgender persons are facing a great deal of oppression,

we have decided to be the change they wish to see in society," Elias George, the then Managing Director of Kochi Metro Rail Limited earlier said. Being a social group which contains people who is not even facilitated with the basic amenities, this job offer was supposed to be a platform to put an end to their identity crisis.

Unfortunately, the blessing is now heading towards the opposite direction. Of the 23 hired, a few of them resigned their job due to several reasons, which was once a media sensation. Since the appointment of transgender people in the Metro rail is a very recent phenomenon no study has been conducted to assess their socio-psychological and economic problems and issues connected with their work. In this context, the present study is relevant to get a good insight in to the various difficulties one of the most vulnerable sections of our society confronting even if they are employed.

Objective: The primary objective of the study is to highlight the major socio-economic concerns of the transgender employees associated with their work in Kochi Metro.

Sources of Data

Primary Data- collected by using an Interview Schedule along with Case Study method for a detail analysis.

Secondary Data- Secondary source like newspapers, articles, e-journals used in collecting data.

Compatibility of Academic Qualification with the Work Assigned

Kerala being the most literate state in the country transgender people also get opportunity for education especially up to the higher education level. Most of these people realise their transgender identity after their childhood and try to continue to hide the identity. Often they may find it difficult to continue the education once the identity is made known to the public. The study conducted among the transgender community employed in Kochi metro reveals various facets of their life situation. Out of total 23 transgender employees data collected from 15 respondents. Majority of the transgender employees are young (53.33%) belongs to the age group of 21-25; 40% belongs to the age group of 26-30 and 6.66% belong to the age category of 36-40.

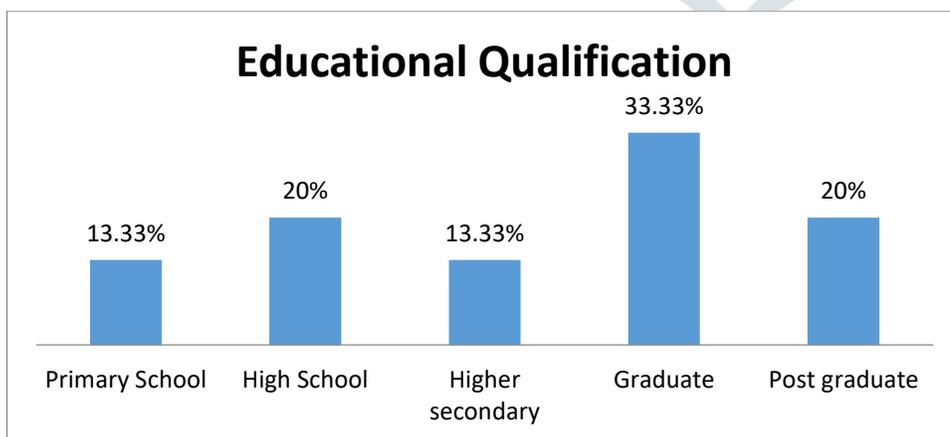


Fig.1

Analysing the educational qualifications (Fig.1) of transgender employed in Kochi metro the percentage post graduates is 20 while of graduates is 33.33. High school educated constitutes 20% and 13.33% respondents were educated at higher secondary and primary levels. So while taking a close look it is clear that majority of them could obtain a bachelor degree which is a good sign of educational achievement in a stigmatised society.

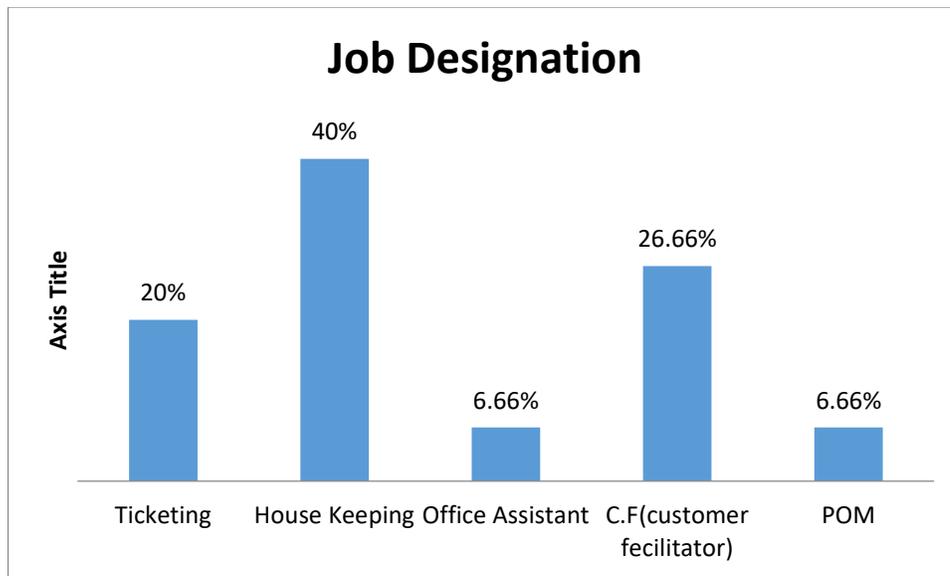


Fig.2

Kochi Metro became the first government project in India to place transgender people in positions based on qualifications, with the motive of giving equal opportunities and initiating a change in public perception towards transgender people. Today members of the transgender community can work without the fear of getting caught. This is a huge step forward not only for the transgender people but also for the employment sector. The transgender have been employed in different sections of Metro service. They were given basic training by KMRL before absorption. Figure-2 shows that out of 15 respondents, 40% working in housekeeping department followed by Customer Care (26.66%), ticketing (20%) Office Assistant and Ticket Operating Machine Officer (6.66% each). The data reveals that though they have been absorbed in to various positions all were not appropriately placed as per their educational qualification. Many graduates have been designated in the house keeping department. It is a kind of under-employment in the strict sense. For instance Ragaranjini, a post-graduate who works as a ticket collector at Edapally station. This is the same with many other employees. The capacity of them are not fully utilized productively. Hence result in to an element of job dissatisfaction.

Remuneration and Satisfaction Level

As per the present study of the monthly income of transgender employed in Kochi metro out of 15 respondents 14 of them (93.3%) get a monthly salary ranges from rupees 5000 to 10000 and only one person gets salary above 10000. Majority of transgender employed in housekeeping departments with a salary ranges from 5000 to 10,000. Availing leave on various grounds may cut down their salary further. Is this remuneration offered to these

employees s justifiable? The answer to this has several dimensions. Common man thinks that getting something is better than getting nothing. From the point of view of the KMRL the existing remuneration is a reasonable one. But the pertinent question is that whether the salary package is sufficient to meet the very basic needs of their life because the life situation of the transgender people is entirely different from others. Looking at the level of satisfaction of transgender in their monthly income 80% are not satisfied and only 20% are satisfied. Therefore, they are compelled to seek part time job as well which is not easy for these gender queer people. This situation sometimes drag them in to the flesh trade at night.

Safe Accomodation- a Major Concern

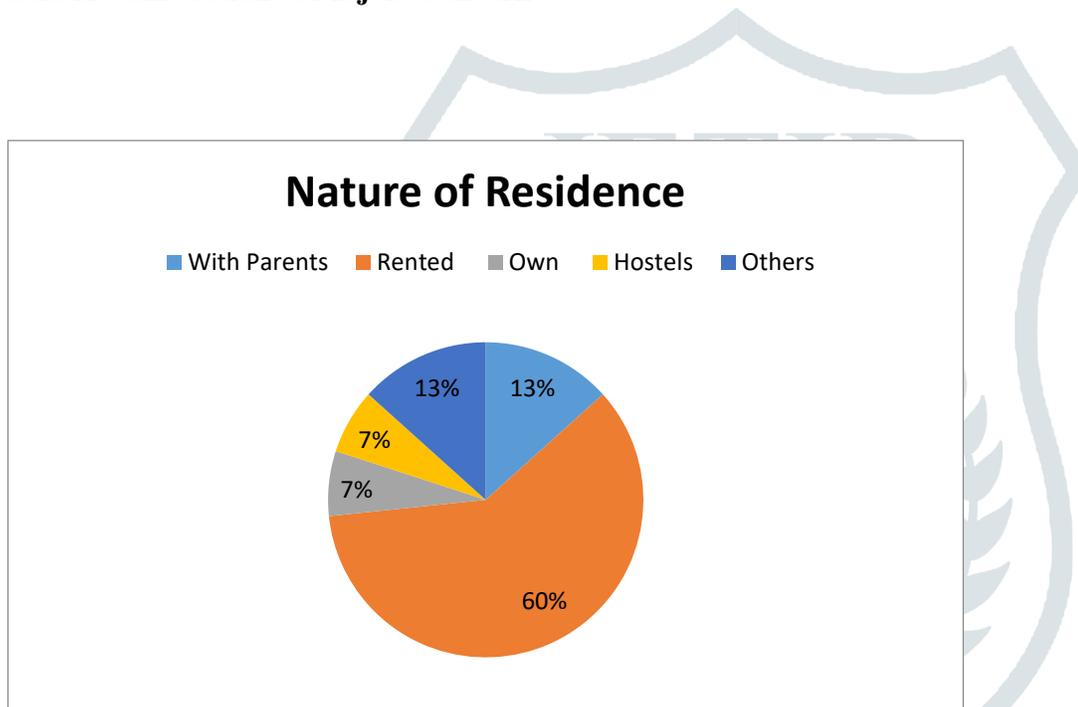


Fig.3

The transgender people were thrilled when they received the appointment. But their joy was short-lived after they found that they could not find a place to sleep in the city. Outside of the workplace, the problem lies with finding a home away from home. While some of them live with their families and commute daily, others stay in the city and often cannot find accommodation. The present study (Fig.3) finds that majority (60%) of them are living in rented houses. Only 7% are living in self owned houses along with their parents while 13% each are living in hostels and other places. Thus they lack care and protection from their families. The other reason is that they tend to move separately because of the repulsion and avoidance from their own families.

Most of these people belong to suburban and village area therefore finding a suitable place for dwelling is a major concern for them. As the stigma against transgender individuals persists in society, people normally deny to rent

out homes or lodges to them. Even if someone is willing to provide, the rent is exorbitant which is unaffordable to them. It may range from rupees 500 and above per day.

Faizu, a transgender who has been trying to stick on with the job, said he was staying in a lodge paying Rs. 600 per day. "I have been trying to rent a house along with some of my friends ever since I got the appointment. But we were turned away everywhere. All people whom we approached excused themselves saying neighbours would create trouble. Most people think we are looking for space for prostitution," says Faizu.

Amruta, who was appointed in the housekeeping department of KMRL at Aluva station, has taken long leave three days after she joined the service as she has not been able to find a place to sleep near Aluva. She now stays in a lodge at Ernakulam South, which is 19 kms from Aluva, by paying Rs 400 a day.

Karthika applied and was recruited as customer facilitator. But her alternate shifts demand that she report for work as early as 5.45 am. Her biggest concern was reaching on time as her home is some 15 km away from her workplace. "Though there are many vacant houses for rent, the owners refuse to hire it out to us. We're forced to stay in lodges coughing up over Rs 600 per day. The problem of finding a shelter turned out to be an unexpected issue," said Sheetal Shyam, a ticketing officer.

Many people already quit the job and several others are on the verge of quitting mainly due to the problem of getting an affordable accommodation. Tripthi, a transgender employee who quit and lives in a one-room house on the outskirts of the city. "Without an accommodation, I can't shuttle every day so I opted out," she said.

CR Reshmi, a spokesperson of the KMRL, said that the company was unable to provide the transgender employees accommodation as they were appointed under a contract given to Kudumbasree, an all-women anti-poverty mission. However, she said that KMRL was trying to help the transgender employees by identifying suitable space that they can hire in the city. However, the transgender activists say it will not be easy as the people in the state were still not ready to accept different gender identities.

As a major breakthrough KMRL with the help of District Administration could find some solution to this problem by arranging accommodation at Jyothis Bhavan in Kakkanad and traveling facilities. But the truth is that no one can completely use the facilities efficiently. Usually the night shifts ended up after 9pm. As Jyothis Bhavan is run by Convent sisters they implement strict rules on them. As per the rules they are not allowed to enter the hostel and go outside after 9pm. The timing of the shift duties do not match with their hostel rules. Also the cab facilities providing to them are also not functioning well. The distance from their place work and accommodation is another reason why they can't use the facilities well.

“The Kerala government and the Kochi Metro are trying to give us an equal space in the society. But the society is still conservative. The KMRL gesture will not help the transgender people unless the society changes its mindset,” says Vijaya Raja Mallika, a transgender and transgender activist.

Transgender activists said that the problems faced by these people were not limited to a lack of accommodation alone. They are ridiculed and abused in public places like railway stations, bus stands, schools, workplaces, malls, theatres and hospitals. They are sidelined and treated as untouchables.

Besides, they are the ones to be blamed whenever anything goes wrong in places the transgender work. In one incident, for example, the accusing finger was turned towards a transgender employee when a cash shortage was found at the ticket counter of KMRL at Edappally Station.

Work Environment and Level of Satisfaction



Fig.4

Figure.4 shows the working environment satisfaction level of transgender people in Kochi metro. The percentage of highly satisfied is 13 and of satisfied is 80. Only 7% reported to have dissatisfaction in the working environment. Working environment satisfaction constitutes a variety of things like enthusiasm, happiness and hope. Friendliness among co-workers and passengers are a big reason behind the satisfaction level but there are exceptions too.

Ragarenjini, 37, is among the 20 transgender people Kochi Metro hired last May across various positions in ticketing and housekeeping. After the initial hiccup, Ragarenjini has now settled into her job. She was quite enthusiastic to join customer care and help commuters. Although her female and male co-workers were initially

distant, they have now become very cooperative and supportive. “Our coworkers are now approachable and helpful” says Ragarenjini. She is more at ease with the way things are now.

The ride has been smooth, but not without its fair share of challenges. The biggest challenge for the transgender individuals at the Metro, however, has been to educate their colleagues about their gender identity. Living and working with members of the transgender community was not easy but problematic to many employees. Some of them had never seen or known anyone like them. Besides, they also had to dispel the notion that all transgender individuals doubled as sex workers. The respondents mentions about the condescending attitude of some of their co-workers who are convinced all transgender people are sex workers — a misconception perpetuated by media reports of transgender people indulging in sex work after their work hours at Kochi Metro. The police in Kerala, too, had been accused of haunting the transgender people and calling them sex workers for several years. “True, there are sex workers among us, but it is not as if all of us do anything that’s illegal,” says Sandra. She also points to harassment by the police security personnel at Metro stations, but only has positive words for passengers. “They mostly behave decently with us. If I notice any signal of a bad behaviour from customers, I move away from the situation.”

Karthika was recruited as customer facilitator. But her alternate shifts demand that she should report for work as early as 5.45 am. Her biggest concern was reaching on time as her home is some 15 km away from her workplace. But her apprehensions about her workplace dissipated when she joined because of helpful coworkers, especially women. She speaks highly of her senior colleagues as well. “They assign work equally,” she says. “As for customers, in case of a bad behaviour, I stop them.”

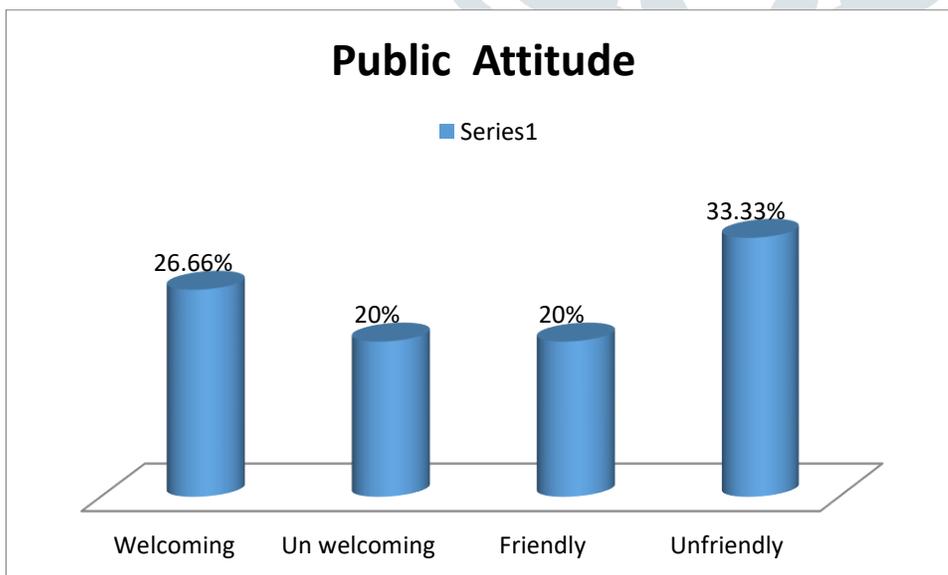


Fig.5

Investigating into the idea of transgender on the nature of attitude of the public towards them

Figure.5 shows that 60% of them feel an unfriendly and unwelcoming approach while the percentage of welcoming and friendly approach is 40. Both unfriendly and unwelcoming attitude of the common public is mainly due to the conventional stereo typed thoughts, prejudice and ignorance. Many of them mentioned that they face unfavourable attitude and rejection more from the elder generations. The young generation and children are more prone to treat them as equals.

Looking into the trans gender employees' opinion about the efforts taken by KMRL to empower the transgender community nearly 74% of transgender opined that KMRL did not do much for their development. On the other hand 26% of them made positive observation on the role of KMRL since they got a job. Majority expressed their view that the job provided by KMRL was often interpreted as mere an act of mercy and the KMRL take undue advantage, name and fame by selling their names conveniently forgetting to provide them with proper facilities like food, accommodation, travel facilities etc.

Conclusion

Kochi Metro's transgender employees face a host of unprecedented problems. Lack of gender-specific washrooms, accommodation problems, and commuting costs are among the most common. Outside of the workplace, the problem lies with finding a home away from home. While some of them live with their families and commute daily, others stay in the city and often cannot find accommodation. As the stigma against transgender individuals persists in society, most are not allowed to rent homes or lodges. Cost is also an issue when it comes to commuting. As most transgender people avoid public transport to circumvent harassment, commuting becomes costlier because they have to depend on taxis and autos or use their own vehicles.

Bringing transgender people into the mainstream is a huge challenge. Providing them with a job is not a be-all-and-end-all solution. Living with the identity of a transgender is viewed as a curse in India as they are treated as wretched creatures; facing discrimination in every facet of life starting from one's own family to the larger society. Multiple problems are faced by transgender which necessitate a variety of solutions and actions. While some actions require immediate implementation such as introducing transgender -specific social welfare schemes, some actions need to be taken on a long-term basis changing the negative attitude of the general public and enhancing a clear understanding about them. The required changes need to be reflected in policies and laws; attitude of the government, general public and health care providers; and health care systems and practice. While public awareness and acceptance of transgender individuals has been gradually improving in the recent decade, there is still a long way to go for ensuring adequate services available to them and for eradicating every kind of discrimination, harassment and social stigmatization that these vulnerable section of our society confront and experience.

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About the Author

Sibi K I

Asst. Professor in Sociology

Sacred Heart College (Autonomous)

Thevara, Kochi, Kerala

sibiki@shcollege.ac.in / sibiitype@gmail.com

Tel: 9447990995

Teaching experience: 23 years