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Coronavirus and stigma among priorities for India's new transgender council

Trans people are often rejected by families and denied jobs, education and healthcare.

By Annie Banerji

Thomson Reuters Foundation (25.08.2020) - <https://tmsnrt.rs/2EGln85> - Discrimination, housing and the impact of COVID-19 are among the top priorities for India's new National Council for Transgender Persons, two trans members said on Tuesday.

India is seen as a global leader for its efforts to improve the lives of an estimated 2 million trans people, who face prejudice in the largely conservative country and mostly survive through begging, performing at weddings or selling sex.

"One point that runs as a spinal cord in all of this is stigma and discrimination," said Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, one of India's highest profile trans leaders and a member of the council, which she described as "historic".

"We have to get down to work with a big advocacy plan to end this," Tripathi, who was a petitioner in a landmark 2014 court ruling which recognised trans people as a third gender with equal rights, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Trans people are often denied access to jobs, education and healthcare - three areas that Tripathi, a founder of the Asia Pacific Transgender Network, highlighted as priorities, along with shelter.

The council aims to ensure equality by advising on and monitoring government policies and to "redress the grievances" of trans people, according to a 2019 law to protect trans rights, which provided for its creation.

Headed by the social justice minister, the council will be packed with representatives from a dozen federal ministries and departments, including health, housing and employment, and state governments, as well as five trans representatives.

But members were unclear what, if any, formal powers the council would have.

Coronavirus

Some hope the council will look at the impact of the new coronavirus on trans people, who have been among those worst hit by India's months-long lockdown, which halted sex work and weddings and passenger trains - a popular site for begging.

"While certain government schemes have helped them, including pension and food ration, others have not reached them," said Meera Parida, who chairs the All Odisha Third Gender Welfare Trust and a member of the council.

Parida said she would try to make it easier for trans people hit by the pandemic to access government support programmes such as housing and affordable rent.

The council is already facing criticism from some within the trans community, days after its formation.

Anindya Hajra, a trans woman who works with LGBT+ charity Pratyay Gender Trust, said it did not adequately represent lower-caste and socio-economically disadvantaged trans people.

"(The council) is a validation to the process of bureaucratic bulldozing of our lives and experiences and deciding on behalf of us," she said.

Independent trans activist Karthik Bittu Kondaiah also criticised the process for selecting members as "undemocratic" and lacking transparency.

Tripathi said trans people from all backgrounds would get a chance to be a part of the council as each member had a tenure of three years.

India's 'invisible' trans community struggles as coronavirus shuts life down

Transgender people, many of whom live a marginal existence, are expected to be hard hit by the COVID-19 epidemic.

By Annie Banerji

Thomson Reuters Foundation (24.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2UuUoRN> - India's coronavirus lockdown leaves transgender people at heightened risk of poverty and ill health because they exist on the margins of society, eking out a living through sex work and begging, activists and community members said on Tuesday.

The warning came as Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a 21-day nationwide lockdown in the country of 1.3 billion, where the virus has claimed at least nine lives.

Anindya Hajra, a trans woman who works with the Pratyay Gender Trust on transgender livelihood issues, said India's estimated 2 million trans people would be among those worst hit by the move because many make their living on the streets.

"They do not have the social privilege of operating within a distant 'online' world when their lives are precariously balanced on the thread of social interaction and functions," said Hajra.

India's Supreme Court ruled in 2014 that transgender people had equal rights, but prejudice against them persists and they are often rejected by their families and denied jobs, education and healthcare.

Many trans women, also known in India as hijras, survive through begging at busy intersections and on trains, performing at social functions such as weddings or selling sex.

That work will likely be impacted as India grinds to a halt, with all passenger trains stopped until March 31 and weddings cancelled.

Shonali, 24, an HIV-positive sex worker in the eastern city of Kolkata, said she barely had any work and was burning through her limited savings buying the food she needs to stay healthy.

"The situation is very bad. I've barely had any clients in the last 10 days. If things continue this way, I'll die," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Shonali, who like most trans Indians goes by one name, said her next health check-up had been postponed indefinitely.

"ART (antiretroviral therapy) medication is undisturbed, but doctors' unavailability may make this already vulnerable population even more so," said Kalki Subramaniam, an activist with the Sahodari Foundation, which helps trans women.

Trans people often face discrimination in accessing housing, forcing many into slums, where isolation is impossible and their risk of contracting the virus increased, Subramaniam said.

Last year the government passed a bill to protect transgender Indians from discrimination in education, employment, healthcare and housing.

Maya Urmi Aher, a transgender woman and rights activist, urged it to help trans people whose livelihoods have been affected by the coronavirus.

"There is talk about aid for labourers, the poor, but why is no one talking about us?" she said. "We are just invisible to everybody."
