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Queer group approaches Kerala High Court for ban on 'conversion therapy'

The illegal pseudoscience practice of 'conversion therapy' that claims to 'cure' queer people has been practiced by several mental health service providers in the state.

By Cris

The News Minute (12.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3dKzpm4> - Nearly five months after the death of Anjana Harish, a queer student from Kerala, a writ petition has been filed at the Kerala High Court, seeking a ban on the practice of 'conversion therapy' on LGBTQIA+ persons by mental health practitioners in the state. It was conversion therapy – an illegal pseudoscience practice that claims to 'cure' queer persons -- that allegedly led to the death by suicide of Anjana in May. The petition seeking ban of this inhuman practice was filed by Queerala, an organisation based in Kerala for the welfare of LGBTQIA+ people, and Raghav, trans activist and board member of Malayalee Transmen Association (MATA).

The High Court will have a hearing of the matter on October 28.

"We had submitted a complaint to the Kerala State Mental Health Authority to look into this matter of mental health service providers practising conversion therapy. A copy was also sent to the Health Secretary," says Rajashree Raju, board member of Queerala. However, there has been no response so far.

What triggered the petition now is the number of conversion therapies that have been reported during the lockdown that began with the coronavirus pandemic in March. In the months that followed, queer people across the state were stuck at home with parents who did not accept them and took them to mental health practitioners.

"We got several complaints in these months. One young woman told us how her parents forced her to see a doctor who asked to admit her at the hospital so that tests can be run on her to see if her internal organs 'are working' and medicines can be administered on her. Another bisexual woman spoke of a psychiatrist who prescribed medicines for schizophrenia for her. She was well aware of the situation and spoke of the Indian Psychiatric Society (Kerala) releasing a statement about conversion therapy - on how 'any attempt to treat a person to change sexual orientation or gender identity is unjustifiable and illegal'. The doctor then told her in a derogatory manner not to teach him and that he was talking 'science' while she was just stating her opinion," Rajashree says.

Yet another woman had a breakdown after being 'counselled' by a mental health practitioner. She had realised she was a lesbian after attending a session by Queerala and went to see a counsellor who gave her medicines. "She was already depressed and this just broke her down. Every time such a case arises, we ask doctors at the IPS to intervene, and they do. When they call these psychiatrists and psychologists who claim to 'cure' queer people, they deny practicing it. But it is not practical to make these interventions every time. There has to be a concrete solution and we need legal action. That's why we have approached the court now," Rajashree says.

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."
