

## TRANSFORMERS: TURNING THE TABLES WITH GRIT

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### ABSTRACT

*Transgender is an umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity or gender expression is different from their natal sex. In recent year's transgender people across class, culture, ethnicity, religion and other various demographics are receiving lot of public attention. Lot of research work has disclosed on structural oppression, social ostracisation faced by the transgender population at large. In this study, we will emphasise on coping and experience of resilience in the transgender people. Resilience can be termed as the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt to threats in the vitality, development or functioning of that system. Thus this qualitative study will focus on resilience, using narrative data and citing two case studies from the respective population. The discussion will be on their unique challenges and their experiences in being resilient despite the everyday challenges they encounter.*

**Keywords:** *Transgender, Culture, Ethnicity, Religion, Social Ostracisation.*

### Introduction

The term transgender is used as a social and political term for people who transgress gender norms or otherwise defy traditional gender categories in some way and encompasses a wide range of identities such as agender, bigender, gender fluid, gender queer, non- binary, female-to-male and male-to-female. As Whittle et al 2007 state that 'transgender' is a very broad term to include all sorts of trans people. It includes cross dressers, people who were a mix of clothing, people with a dual or no gender identity, and transsexual people. It is also used to define a political and social community which is inclusive of transsexual people, transgender people, cross dressers (transvestites), and other groups of 'gender variant' people. Although gender diversity prevails within the community, lack of understanding, knowledge and awareness often leads to prejudice and transphobic behaviours.

In the last decade, huge number of research work from diverse fields has explored structural oppression, marginalization, social ostracisation and psychological issues faced by transgender population. These researches discuss on their risk factors and do help policymakers and clinicians to understand the core problems that they encounter. Due to that transgender people result in facing pervasive structural oppression. Yet on the other hand little research has documentation of their experience of resilience. Their experience of resilience would enhance them to lead meaningful, accepting and fulfilling lives so that they can cultivate what lies best within them.

The construct of resilience has been defined as a set of learned behaviours evolving from an individual's system of beliefs that precedes one's ability to cope. It is remarkable that the definition of resilience has enlarged to include not only negative effects of trauma and exploitation but also inclusive of competence-based models that focus on building strengths. Resiliency as Harvey points pertain to the resources an individual has available to be deal with stressful situations. In this present study the authors will discuss coping and resilience from the respondent's lenses for a deeper understanding and will support it through two case studies (female to male & male to female).

### Case 1

K.C, aged twenty one identifying oneself as male, hailing from Tinsukia, Assam, India is a student by profession. He revealed having a disturbed childhood and wasn't emotionally close with anyone in specific in his family. K.C was specific in mentioning about feeling of being in an alien body

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since the age of eight or nine. He felt uncomfortable whenever the pronoun as 'she', 'her' was labelled for him. He had limited friends and mostly they were boys. He lost his mother at the age of seventeen and felt disrespectful to his own self while performing the rituals done by a girl. People did pass foul remarks when he opposed certain rituals that had to be done as a girl. Following which he was rebuked by his father and other family members. His father remarried and started staying separately. Since then he started running his own snacks shop in the evening, studying at night and going to college in the day time. He has realised that his family and relatives wouldn't understand what he is undergoing thus he started staying aloof. His only motive has been to finish his college, work hard and save money for his sex-reassignment-surgery.

K.C mentioned that he had been in a relationship with a girl for almost two years. They had to terminate their relationship as the girl's family got aware of it and considered it sinful. Following the incident he did feel isolated, rejected and angry yet he did not choose maladaptive ways like substance to comfort himself. Rather he opted for judo classes, got himself few pets and did spend time at his snacks centre. He mentioned 'life got difficult for me yet I have to move on, to turn myself into a true man, a true man in every sense. You see my mother left, she left yet I need to move on so that I can at least fulfil my dream of becoming a man'. K.C mentions that he aspires to join the military forces and lead a fulfilling, respectable life after his sex-reassignment-surgery.

### **Case 2**

K.D, twenty four year identifying oneself as female, hailing from Dibrugarh, Assam, India is a model by profession. She recalls her childhood to be a pleasant one as she was emotionally close with her parents and younger sister. Since her childhood she had always liked the way her mother dressed herself and preferred her sister's clothing rather than her own. She was performing average in school and did have friends consisting of both boys and girls. As she started entering her adolescence she started feeling a weird feeling about her own body and herself. Initially she was confused as everyone of her age were quiet contented with their own body but she couldn't realise her own discomfort. With the help of internet and after confiding to a friend, she understood the concept of 'transwoman'. After her class tenth exam, she started to design dress-wears with which she started earning. This way she kept earning and saving money and also continued with her studies. On completion of her twelfth board exam she disclosed about her gender identity to her family. Initially her mother and sister were at shock. Yet they did empathise with her and stood with her. It was her father who couldn't take this revelation and swore to never speak with her until she identified herself as a man.

K.D left her home and started staying separately, which was challenging in a small town like Dibrugarh. Yet she stayed focussed on what she dreamt of and kept on with her dress design work. She simultaneously enrolled in Bachelors of Arts on a distance mode as she had to devote her time for her work to save for sex-reassignment-surgery. When K.D. began with her hormone therapy her mother and sister did emotionally support her. Soon after that she migrated to Delhi and participated in a beauty pageant held for transgender people. She won that and soon was assigned few modelling assignments. She mentioned 'I know not everyone will accept me, neither in family or in the society. Yet, I can't stop being who I am and I am a proud woman'. K.D aspires to join the Hollywood as she mentions that in India, transgender people lack recognition and thus do not receive the role of a protagonist.

### **Transgender Individuals and Resilience**

Rutter, 1987 found that resilience 'does not reside in the psychological chemistry of the moment but in the ways in which people deal with the life changes and in what they do about their stressful or disadvantageous circumstances'. Empirical evidence reveals resilience as a mitigating factor that assist transgender individuals cope with oppression. In a quantitative study by Grossman and his colleagues in 2011 with fifty five transgender youth in New York found to be resilient with greater social support, high self esteem and positive mental health outcomes. A qualitative study by Singh et al, 2011 in United States identified five themes. Evolving a self-generated definition of self, embracing self worth, awareness of oppression, connection with a supportive community and cultivating hope for the future were the five themes. A quantitative in 2015 by Breslow et al was conducted with 552 transgender individuals. It was done by using Brief Resilience Scale and the results associated with lower levels of psychological distress.

### **Methodology**

For the present study, the primary researcher has contacted the respondents via phone and email and non-probability sampling method was used. Data was gathered from two individuals who identified themselves as transgender. Inclusion criteria include samples to be self identifying transgender,

hailing from Assam, India and to be above 18 years of age. Exclusion criteria was anyone identifying to be cisgender and below 18 years of age. An exploratory qualitative design was used for this study. The subjective experiences of the respondents were vital consideration in this qualitative paper. On receiving consent from the participants, the procedure was explained and assurance of confidentiality was provided. Open ended interview technique was applied to collect information through narrative experiences from the participant. Face to face interviews were held to obtain firsthand experience. Probing was done in order to gather free flow of information. All the interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis technique was used to identify common themes in each interview (themes discussed in the results section).

### **Findings and Discussions**

The main purpose of this present study was to gather narrative data from transgender individuals on their experience of resilience. Thus the interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded and analyzed for themes. The researchers identified three common themes from the case studies. These are: accepting one's own self worth, positive self growth and fostering hope for the future.

Accepting one's own self worth is one of the first themes that will be discussed. It reflects that they have accepted their self and is assertive about the fact that they as transgender have the right to live their life on their own terms and preferences as any other human being. They face segregation but they oppose them, which in turn help them to stand up for themselves and making them feel being authentic to oneself.

Positive self growth is the second theme that emerged. Despite the rejection and transphobia that they encountered, they adopted adaptive ways of coping and drew positive beliefs about themselves. They are aware that these discriminations and prejudices will persist yet the safe way is to accept and have a positive image about oneself. The respondents opted for people, activities and opportunities which will help shape oneself in a positive way.

Fostering hope for the future is the third theme and one of the important one. As this helped them to set goals for themselves and learn new skills and dream for a better future. Respondents are specific and about their sex change and hope for a respectful, fulfilling life following that.

Respondents emphasised behaviours that influenced their capacity to cope during crisis and adverse situations. Many of the themes of resilience are consistent with a study done by Seligman, 2019 where participants cited examples of how they experienced positive emotion which includes self-confidence, self-esteem and positive ways of coping. The findings of the present study are in tune with the study done by Singh and his colleagues in 2011 where the common themes were evolving a self-generated definition of self, embracing self worth, awareness of oppression, connection with a supportive community and cultivating hope for the future and the variant themes included social activism and being a positive role model for others.

### **Limitations and Strengths of the Study**

The major limitation of this qualitative study is that it was done with a less diverse population.

The study is a qualitative one, citing experiences of female to male (FTM) as well as that of male to female (MTF). Narrative approach helped to examine lived experiences of transgender people as compared to quantitative research where it is mostly used to quantify the problem by generating numerical data. Themes from this study suggest transgender individuals are resilient and have adaptive coping measures in encountering discrimination, transphobia and ostracisation.

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