

# A STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY AMONG SEXUAL MINORITIES: A CASE FROM TRANSGENDER WOMEN

**Kamal Gautam, Ph D**

Associate Professor,  
Tribhuvan University, Nepal  
Email: [kamalgautamktm@gmail.com](mailto:kamalgautamktm@gmail.com)

DOI: 10.31364/SCIRJ/v6.i6.2018.P0618556

<http://dx.doi.org/10.31364/SCIRJ/v6.i6.2018.P0618556>

**Abstract:** The paper aims to analyze the experiences of sexual minorities while struggling for their identity in the public. The sexual minorities comprise of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals, but Transgender individuals are the most marginalized, misunderstood and the least studied group (Booth, 2014). The current narrative case study explores the life journey of two transgender women and uncovers three themes: different identity feelings; disclosure of gender identity; and discovering the gender community. The struggles made by these women to reclaim their identity support the ideas underpinned by Queer theory. The multiple gender roles played by them as a father at home and as a transgender woman in the outer world have become an unsolved problem for them. They are hiding their transgender identity and are always in the fear of isolation and rejections from their near ones. This type of conflicting situations between minority values and dominant values bring a tragic condition of both the minority people like transgender individuals and their family at least. So, the deconstruction of the sex/gender split, and the destabilization of overall discursive legitimacy of modern sexual classifications and power relations will be a sort of magical resolution of the gender issues which will help to build a new vision of community.

**Keywords:** sexual minorities, transgender women, narrative inquiry, gender identity, gender community, queer theory

## Background

This study is about the sexual minorities and their experiences on the struggles made by them for their identity in the public. They comprise of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual/transgender (LGBT) individuals and are identified as a group who have different sexual identity, orientation or practices from majority of the surrounding society (UNDP/USAID, 2014). Gender identity refers to a person's personal feelings of being a man or woman, regardless of how they look or what others may think about who they are (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). It is an individual's emotional and physiological sense of self-identification as male or female (Wilson & Reiner, 1998). "The only way to determine a person's gender identity is to ask them" (Kessler & McKenna, 1978, p.9).

Transgender is an umbrella term used to describe individuals whose gender identity or expression differs from socially constructed norms associated with sex assigned at birth (Bradford, Reisner, Honnold, & Xavier, 2013). The term challenges the boundaries of sex and gender (Feinberg, 1996) and is used to describe many categories of people who are gender variant.

Thus, transgender includes any persons whose gender identity, "one's subjective sense of being a boy, girl, man, woman, or some combination thereof" (Pfeffer, 2010, p.167), and/or gender expression, "social presentation of gender in everyday life through dress, bodily comportment, vocal expressions, etc." (Pfeffer 2010, p. 167) does not match the sex and/or gender they were assigned at birth.

Transgender people are found suffering from a number of problems. They face misunderstanding, prejudice, and isolation as a result of not adhering to traditional models of a two-gender system; one is believed to be either naturally male or female. Transgender people, therefore, do not identify as the sex they were assigned at birth based on their physical anatomy. This mismatch may cause profound psychological distress (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In a culture that determines boys and girls by biology and physiology, people who exist outside that norm are not fully understood or accepted. Generally, transgender people face increased rates of alcohol and drug use, depression (Lombardi & van Servellen, 2000), and suicide due to the stigmas associated with defying normative sexed categories. Many LGBT people report sexual harassment and discrimination during recruitment and employment (UNDP/ USAID, 2014). They are unable to find a respectable job and are compelled to involve in unsocial activities to solve their hand to mouth problem.

The chief obstacle for transgender individuals may be society's insistence on a gender binary-either male or female. A binary view marginalizes the transgender population; therefore, transgender individuals experience more social stigma than lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals (Gazzola & Morrison, 2014). Transgender individuals are the most marginalized, misunderstood and the least

studied group in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community (Booth, 2014). Therefore, the study is focused on the struggles made by the sexual minorities for their identity in the public with the following research questions:

- How do the sexual minorities struggle to reclaim their identity in the public?
- What are their feelings regarding the way public perceive them?

In this study, the term *transgender women* is used to refer to individuals who were identified as male at birth, socialized as boys and men, and are now living on the trans-feminine spectrum of gender expression.

### **Objectives of the study**

This study is an attempt to bridge the gap between the general public and the sexual minorities by bringing together their different perspectives on sex, gender, and sexuality. The main objective of this study is to explore the unique and individual experiences of sexual minorities while struggling for identity in the public.

### **Methods of the study**

As this study focuses on the experiences and the feelings of the transgender women while struggling for their identity, narrative inquiry is used in my study that focuses on understanding the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants (Patton, 2002); it is "the study of the ways human experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2); it is "set in human stories of experience" (Webster & Mertova, p.1, 2007).

### **Participants**

Due to the time and resource constraints, only two participants who were self-identified as transgender and ready for face-to-face interview were included in the study. Both the participants were biologically male and between the ages of 30 and 40 so as to provide a narrowed focus and depth of experience. They were from different racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic background. They were free and open enough to express their feelings and experience. It was their volunteer service and they were not paid for their participation.

Participant - 1: Pinki (name changed) is biologically a male, but she claims herself as a transgender female. She is of 36 years and from Chhetri community permanently residing in Dang. She is married with a woman and has two children. She is working in a transgender's organization as a field staff. She has studied up to class 10 and is economically sound.

Participant - 2: Dilu (name changed) is biologically a male, but she claims herself as a transgender female. She is of 31 years and from Newar community in Kathmandu. She is married and has three children. She is recently working in a social organization as a helper in a daily wage-basis. She is just literate and has poor economic condition.

### **Procedures**

First of all, I met with a responsible person of Blue Diamond Society, Kathmandu and discussed for the possible cases for my study and selected two of them who met the criteria of my study. I interviewed two participants separately using a semi-structured interview guideline with open-ended questions. Questions were asked to gain insight into the unique, individual experiences of the participants. The participants were informed that they were being recorded for the purposes of transcription. Interview transcripts were approved by the participants and they were assured for their privacy and confidentiality.

### **Analysis**

After conducting both the interviews, I transcribed the recorded data verbatim into a word document. I identified an initial list of codes based on the content of the participants' responses. Once this list was compiled, the codes were indexed into core ideas or themes that were shared by each participant. These themes and experiences were identified, compared, and contrasted to find commonality and uniqueness amongst transgender individual life stories.

### **Question of identity among sexual minorities: A queer perspective**

Queer theory represents the lenses through which researchers can explore and understand the diversities in sexual identity and human behavior. As the queer theory is an approach open to all the oppressed people by the hegemony of heterosexual norms, I utilize this focus of inquiry (Cresswell, 2007) to explore the struggles made in the life of sexual minorities to reclaim their identity in the public. I claim in my study that all sexual categories (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, heterosexual) are open, fluid, and non-fixed (Cresswell, 2007; Jagose, 1996); and sex, gender and sexual identities are not an essential 'who we are', but instead a performance, what we do moment by moment (Jolly, 2000). So, I support that, as the identities are not born but rather constructed through repeated performative actions (Butler, 1988) and consist of many varied components, categorization of the sexual minorities and labeling them by one characteristic is incomplete (Jagose, 1996) and is always changing and inconsistent.

Furthermore, my study aims to focus on the deconstruction of sex/gender split (Palazzani, 2013) and refuses both heteronormativity and homosexual identity because I claim that adoption of homosexual identity only accelerates the strength of heterosexuality (Namaste, 1994, p. 230). Therefore, my study emphasizes on the destabilization of overall discursive legitimacy of modern sexual classifications and the power relations, which will help to bring a sort of magical resolution of the gender issues

(Watney, 1994, p. 23) and will help build a new vision of community (Namaste, 1994, p. 229), where there will be no discrimination in the name of identity, roles and practices in all the areas including sex, sexuality, and gender.

## Results and discussions

Three relevant themes emerged after analyzing the interview data are - different identity feelings; disclosure of gender identity; and discovering the gender community.

### Different identity feelings

When asked how they came to identify as trans-feminine, they began their personal narratives with a description of how they experienced femininity during their childhood. They described "always feeling like a girl or female". When asked how they knew that they "felt" feminine or female, they described how their inner sense of femininity was expressed through stereotypically feminine appearances, long haircuts, feminine clothing choices, and hatred of stereotypically masculine attributes such as "wearing dresses". Pinki recalled, "It wasn't so much that I was doing this to be a girl, it was like, I just wanted to dress like that. And I think it wasn't that huge of an issue". They also preferred stereotypically feminine activities, such as "cooking meal", "cleaning utensils", and "sewing *duna-tapari*".

Both the participants made sense of their childhood femininity through self-comparison to female siblings: Dilu stated, "I was always into my sister's things, and wanting to dress like her, and be like her...and I had intense jealousy that she got to be a girl and I didn't". Though the participants had intense thirst to direct towards femininity, the outer status quo became a barrier in her further step ahead as Pinki said, "It [cross dressing] was scary. I mean it felt good. It was one step closer to being one person for me, a woman."

There was a similarity in the experience of childhood femininity between Pinki and Dilu. As Dilu remembered, "At about six years...from childhood, I started using my mother's lipsticks, put on her clothes..... many others, while alone [at home] ...but put off them at hurry because of fear to be seen by others". She had a tension between the hope of being seen and the terror of being revealed. It is an illustration of how the transgender women experienced the thrill and excitement of possibly getting caught dressing in girls' clothes, and the horrific consequences they imagined if it was revealed to others.

Pinki usually used to be at home, alone, no one to care her and no interest to move outside. But, one day while she was moving on the road alone, she saw two people looking different as she said " they were something new, I felt...I mean different [from other people], but similar to me ..". For the first time, she realized that there were some other people who resembled herself and she was not alone.

### Disclosure of gender identity

Participants felt more ease in disclosing to people who they thought might be accepting, if not immediately than eventually. Relationships are deeply meaningful; therefore people seek acceptance or approval from friends, family members and peers. They sought validation of safety and love in their relationships more so than expectations that loved ones understand their gender identity.

Pinki expresses her beliefs that she will not be accepted or understood, therefore she has not disclosed about her gender identity to her family and even her wife too who was married at 24, before 12 years as she told:

I know that transgender people are not generally accepted...in society. And even though... I can say this, I also know that um... there are people who would not accept me, and I know that um...were I discovered, or when I come out, it will mean probably the loss of my family. I don't want to hurt those [children and wife] around me.

On the basis of these findings, it appears that as transgender people want to disclose their gender identity to loved ones, they are fearful of breaking their family relationships. The findings of this study are similar to previous research on perceptions of family support for same-sex couples (Rostosky, et al., 2004), where disclosure was viewed as a complex process with a variety of responses from family members. They expected that family members may not understand and reject their gender identity, yet hoped that they would still be accepted as people and able to maintain those relationships.

Disclosure of gender identity to a loved one who does not have information or understanding about gender identity throws their understanding into question. Participants feared that disclosure would lead to judgment and remembered the fear, shame and secrecy that was often present as they were coming to discover their own gender identity. As they reflected on their own questioning, they expected that loved ones would be even less accepting.

This finding supports the claim that there are many assumptions and misconceptions about transgender sexuality (Denny, 2007). That's why, transgender people hesitate to disclose their identity even with their nearest ones.

### Discovering the gender community

After her first encounter with the 'different people' (later knew they were transgender women), Pinki was interested towards them and a day came, when she saw one of them nearer to a tea-shop, went closer to her, she doesn't know why, but astonished herself by her reply that "we are same". And then, she stated, "I got involved in the community, and I began to feel that these are my people. This is my tribe."

But the story of Dilu is a bit different. She recalled, "A day, two women...well make-up...but looking strange, in a sense ...had masculine face, came to my home and talked to my father". She didn't know 'what happened' but only knew that father was angry to them. They frequently visited my home and later I realized that they were from some organization and trying to convince my parents on my different identity. She doesn't know till today how they found her as she expressed "I never met them before".

As the time passed, both of them got involved in the transgender community. They felt relaxed and safe when they met the people of all ages, sizes, and shapes similar to them. They started cross-dressing but it was really hard for them as Pinki said:

When I really started dressing fully, I had a hard time for a bit... I had heavy facial hair, a very, very deep voice, and no hair on my head.... Whenever I dressed, put on makeup, as soon as I walked out in public, heads would turn.

Pinki started working in their society as a paid staff and was away from home. She was free to adopt transgender identity but her family was unknown about it or she was concealing it from them. First few efforts of Dilu could not continue her transgender appearance, and was compelled to suppress her feelings for the sake of her family as she expressed, "I prefer to be woman, but my mother cannot tolerate it...she gave birth to son".

The findings support that there are various experiences in approaching their gender community, which has made them 'feeling empowered' and happy for a moment or more but realize soon that it is not the entire solution to eliminate their difficulties, pain and sorrows regarding their identity issues. Their struggles towards the identity, in real sense 'No Identity' at all, will remain continue till there is no discrimination in the names of sex, gender, and so on.

The experience of Pinki and Dilu regarding their struggles for their identity supports the ideas underpinned by Queer theory and Minority Stress Model. As discussed earlier, Queer theory states that all the sexual categories are open, fluid and non-fixed and the categorization by one characteristic is incomplete. As in the case of both Pinki and Dilu, they claim to be the transgender women but at the same time, they are married with heterosexual women and bearing their biological children too. They are playing both the roles - transgender women as their gender identity, and heterosexual role as a father and a bread winner at home. It reveals their multiple sexual roles or diversity in sexuality, which is not accepted by their own family and society. That's why, more specifically as in Pinki's case, there is the experience of concealing the gender identity and expectation of isolation and rejections from the near ones which are postulated in Minority Stress Model as stress processes. This type of conflicting situations between minority values and dominant values bring a tragic condition of both the minority people like transgender individuals and their family at least. So, the deconstruction of the sex/gender split, and the destabilization of overall discursive legitimacy of modern sexual classifications and power relations will be a sort of magical resolution of the gender issues which will help to build a new vision of community.

## Conclusion

Although narrative inquiry method lays an important foundation for further research, it is limited. The story of two transgender women cannot begin to expose the diversity within the trans-gender population. Adult transgender individuals represent a diverse group, but diversity-within-diversity cannot be ignored. These two transgender women's narrative provokes more questions than it answers.

The transgender people in LGBT community is still misunderstood and maligned by social stigma in our society. The current narrative case study explored the life journey of two transgender women and uncovered three themes: different identity feelings; disclosure of gender identity; and discovering the gender community. Queer theory was used to harvest meanings from these themes based on the experiences of transgender women struggling for gender identity in the public. A suggestion for future research is to include a sample of diverse ages, ethnicities and gender identities.

## References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Booth, J. (2014). Viewpoint: Treating transgender patients with respect. *American Nurse Today*, 9, 1–3.
- Bradford, J., Reisner, S.L., Honnold, J.A. & Xavier, J. (2013). Experience of transgender-related discrimination and implications for health: Results from the Virginia Transgender Health Initiative Study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103, 1820–1829. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2012.300796
- Butler, J. (1998). Reformatory acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519 -531. doi: 110.2307/3207893.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2-14.
- Cresswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousands Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Denny, D. (2007). Transgender identities and bisexual expression. In B. Firestein (Ed.), *Becoming visible*, (pp. 268-284). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Feinberg, L. (1996). *Transgender warriors: Making history from Joan of Arc to Rupaul*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

- Gazzola, S.B. & Morrison, M.A. (2014). Cultural and personally endorsed stereotypes of transgender men and transgender women: Notable correspondence or disjunction? *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 15, 76–99.  
doi:10.1080/15532739.2014.937041
- Jagose, A. (1996). *Queer theory: An introduction*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jolly, S. (2000). *What use is queer theory to development?* A paper presented on Queering Development Seminar Series of IDS/Sussex University, Brighton, UK.
- Kessler, S. J., & McKenna, W. (1978). *Gender: An ethnomethodological approach*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Lombardi, E., van Servellen, G. (2000). Building culturally sensitive substance use prevention and treatment programs for transgendered populations. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 19, 291-296.
- Nanaste, K. (1994, July). The politics of inside/outside: Queer theory, post-structuralism, and a sociological approach to sexuality. *Sociological theory*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 220 - 231. Retrieved from <http://links.jstor.org>
- Palazzani, L. (2013). From gender to queer. *Gender in philosophy and law*. Retrieved from <https://www.springer.com/in/book/9789400749900>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Pfeffer, C. A. (2010). Women's work?: Women partners of transgender men doing Housework and emotion work. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(1), 165-183.
- Rostosky, S. S., Korfhage, B. A., Duhigg, J. M., Stern, A. J., Bennett, L., & Riggle, E. D. B. (2004). Same-sex couple perceptions of family support: A consensual qualitative study. *Family Process*, 43, 43-57.
- Webster, L. & Mertova, P. (2007). Using narrative inquiry as a research method: An introduction to using critical event narrative analysis in research on learning and teaching. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wilson, B.E., & Reiner, W.G. (1998). Management of intersex: A shifting paradigm. In A.D. Dreger (Ed.), *Intersex in the age of ethics* (pp.119-135). Hagerstown, MD: University Publishing Group.