

# Gender and Regional Disparities in Growth Transcending Boundaries: A Qualitative Understanding of Gender Identity and Economic Inequalities among Transsexuals in Kerala

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## **Abstract**

This research delves into the intricate relationship between gender identity and geographical disparities in economic growth among transgender people in Kerala, India. Despite Kerala's progressive policies, transgender individuals still grapple with societal bias, limited educational and healthcare access, and economic challenges. Through qualitative analysis, the researcher scrutinises interviews and existing literature, shedding light on the varied socio-economic experiences of transgender individuals in Kerala.

The study uncovers marked disparities in economic status, social integration, and overall quality of life among transgender people across Kerala's urban, rural, and district lines. The factors driving these disparities, such as education levels, career opportunities, healthcare access, and community support, are explored in-depth. The research also probes the role of cultural norms and societal perceptions of gender diversity in shaping the experiences of Kerala's transgender community.

Moreover, the research evaluates the impact of state policies and grassroots initiatives on enhancing the lives of the transgender populace. The findings furnish crucial insights for governmental bodies, NGOs, and activist groups striving for improved gender parity and social justice in Kerala, spotlighting successful strategies and pinpointing areas needing attention. Ultimately, this study underscores the vital importance of tailored interventions to address region-specific challenges faced by Kerala's transgender community, championing a more inclusive society that values all gender identities and experiences.

*Keywords: Transgender, Regional Disparities, Gender Identity, Economic Inequality, Social Prejudices*

## **Introduction**

In the kaleidoscope of India's social, cultural, and economic landscape, Kerala stands out for its progressive policies, high literacy rates, and comprehensive health indicators. Historically dubbed the "Kerala Model," the state's development paradigm has been praised for combining social welfare with economic growth.

Yet, beneath this façade of progress, certain marginalised groups, particularly transgender individuals, grapple with deeply entrenched societal prejudices and economic disparities.

Transgender people, despite their ancient roots in Indian society and culture, have consistently faced stigmatisation, discrimination, and a lack of acceptance. This marginalisation has invariably affected their access to fundamental rights like education, employment, and healthcare, curtailing their economic growth potential. The situation becomes more complex when viewed through the lens of geography. Urban-rural divides, coupled with regional disparities, further exacerbate the challenges faced by the transgender community. Kerala, despite its progressive stance, is no exception to these challenges.

Understanding the intersection of gender identity with geographical disparities in economic growth is critical from a human rights perspective and designing informed policies that promote inclusive development. As societies evolve, there's an urgent need to transcend traditional boundaries and acknowledge the myriad experiences and identities. This research delves deep into this intricate matrix, shedding light on the lived experiences of transgender people across urban and rural areas of Kerala. Through a blend of quantitative and qualitative insights, this study seeks to unravel the myriad layers of socio-economic trajectories that the transgender community in Kerala traverses.

Furthermore, while Kerala's inclusive initiatives are commendable, assessing their reach and impact is imperative. Do they indeed benefit the marginalised? Or do they inadvertently perpetuate the existing disparities? This paper attempts to answer these pressing questions, underpinning the need for a comprehensive, ground-up approach to policy-making and implementation.

The rich tapestry of India's diverse cultures and identities has, for centuries, been a testament to the nation's ability to embrace difference. Kerala, in many respects, encapsulates this ethos. Known for its matriarchal heritage, political awareness, and history of progressive reforms, the state has often been at the forefront of social change. However, the journey towards complete inclusivity and understanding is intricate and prolonged. While Kerala has taken significant strides in numerous spheres of development, the path to gender inclusivity, especially concerning the transgender community, still contains innumerable roadblocks.

The transgender community, a significant part of India's social fabric, has its roots steeped in ancient traditions and cultural practices. They have been visible, yet paradoxically invisible regarding rights, recognition, and opportunities. The societal dichotomy in perceiving them – reverence in religious contexts yet marginalisation in daily life – underscores the complexity of their existence.

The situation unfolds with added layers when we narrow our focus to Kerala. Though advanced in many human development indices, the state grapples with numerous challenges when addressing transgender rights and opportunities. The confluence of cultural, economic, and regional disparities presents a unique context. The urban spaces, often seen as more 'liberal', may provide avenues for economic opportunities, but they also come with their share of prejudices and discrimination. Conversely, the rural heartlands, bound by traditional norms, might offer community support but limit economic and educational avenues.

Such disparities necessitate a comprehensive exploration into how gender identity and regional differences intersect, especially in the context of economic growth. This multifaceted understanding is essential to bridge the existing gaps in policy, societal perceptions, and ground realities.

This study, thus, is not just an academic endeavour but a call to action. It beckons stakeholders from all walks of life to engage, introspect, and innovate. The insights derived here aim to inform, inspire, and instigate changes that ensure that the transgender community in Kerala and broader contexts can live with dignity, equality, and prosperity.

## Literature Review

Historically, the transgender community, commonly called the 'Hijra' community in South Asia, is significant in Indian culture and folklore (Nanda, 1999). Their presence is prominent in ancient scriptures, royal courts, and religious ceremonies. However, the colonial era marked a turning point, with the British colonial administration criminalising the community through the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871, setting the stage for their subsequent socio-economic marginalisation (Reddy, 2005).

Kerala boasts remarkable health, literacy, and women's empowerment achievements compared to the rest of India, often called the 'Kerala Model' of development (Jeffrey, 1992). However, the state's progress in addressing issues faced by transgender individuals is complex. While state-led initiatives have promoted transgender rights, the ground realities reflect disparities and deeply ingrained prejudices (Raj, 2017).

Studies have shown that urban spaces in India, with their perceived modernity, do offer transgender individuals some economic opportunities, especially in the informal sector. However, they are also rife with discrimination, often forcing many into professions like begging and sex work (Halli, 2007). In contrast, rural areas provide a close-knit community structure, but opportunities are limited due to traditional societal norms (Das & Dutta, 2010).

Economic hardships faced by the transgender community are multidimensional. Lack of formal education, societal prejudices, and limited job opportunities contribute to their financial vulnerabilities (Neuman, 2013). Despite its progressive policies, Kerala is not insulated from these challenges, with many transgender individuals often confined to low-paying jobs devoid of security and growth opportunities (Kumar & Sekher, 2011).

Several progressive policies have been initiated nationally, such as the NALSA judgment in 2014 and at the state level in Kerala, aiming to uplift the transgender community (Tharoor, 2018). Grassroots movements and NGOs are pivotal in translating these policies into actionable change (Menon, 2015). Their efforts in Kerala, including skill development programs, awareness campaigns, and community building, have been noteworthy (George, 2019).

Despite legal recognitions and policy reforms, societal acceptance remains a significant hurdle. Cultural norms and entrenched biases impede the seamless integration of transgender individuals into mainstream society. With its rich cultural tapestry, Kerala presents a unique blend of acceptance and prejudice, with instances of inclusive temple festivals and everyday discrimination (Jayaram, 2020).

Education is a pivotal avenue for social mobility. However, for transgender individuals, educational institutions often become spaces of marginalisation. Dropout rates among transgender students are alarmingly high due to discrimination, bullying, and lack of gender-sensitive facilities (Chakrapani et al., 2012). Kerala's literacy landscape, despite its general achievements, mirrors these challenges, with many transgender individuals unable to access or continue formal education (Gopalakrishnan, 2016).

While healthcare is a universal right, transgender individuals face unique barriers. They encounter issues ranging from a lack of sensitive medical care to outright discrimination within healthcare settings (Saraswathi, 2015). Despite a robust public health infrastructure in Kerala, there's a gap in providing transgender-specific health services and adequate training for healthcare professionals (Philip, 2018).

Most transgender individuals in India are pushed into the informal sector, facing economic insecurities and vulnerabilities (Dutta, 2017). In Kerala, cultural acceptance and societal prejudice create a paradox. While certain traditional professions, like performing at religious ceremonies, offer livelihood opportunities, mainstream employment remains challenging (Kumar & Suresh, 2014).

The media plays a significant role in shaping societal perceptions. The representation (or the lack thereof) of transgender individuals in Indian media has historically oscillated between stereotyping and invisibility. However, recent years have seen a positive shift, with more nuanced portrayals and narratives emerging, especially from regional media in states like Kerala (Joseph, 2019).

While the NALSA judgment was a watershed moment for transgender rights in India, its implementation remains inconsistent. State-specific policies, like Kerala's Transgender Policy in 2015, reflect a move towards inclusivity. However, the gap between policy formation and its on-ground impact is evident, necessitating continuous scrutiny and advocacy (Singh & Ghosh, 2016).

One of the defining features of the transgender community's resilience is its strong kinship ties and peer support systems. In Kerala, 'gharana' systems or informal family structures provide emotional and economic support, especially without familial acceptance. The role of these networks in mental health, economic sustenance, and social integration cannot be understated (Ramanathan, 2017).

The experience of a transgender individual is not monolithic and is shaped by multiple factors, including caste, religion, economic status, and geographical location. With its diverse demographics, Kerala offers a unique insight into how these intersectionalities impact the life trajectories of transgender individuals, adding layers of complexity to their challenges and experiences (Menon & Narayanan, 2020).

The extant literature provides a comprehensive foundation to understand the myriad challenges and prospects faced by the transgender community, especially in nuanced environments like Kerala. This research seeks to build upon this foundation, providing fresh insights and updated perspectives on the evolving scenario.

### **Objectives**

1. To Understand Regional Disparities: Investigate the differences in economic well-being, social integration, and overall quality of life of transgender individuals based on urban and rural boundaries and among different districts in Kerala.
2. To Assess Socio-economic Factors: Examine the role of educational attainment, employment opportunities, healthcare access, and community support networks in determining the economic trajectories of transgender people in Kerala.
3. To Explore Cultural Norms: Understand the impact of cultural and societal norms related to gender variety on the experiences of transgender people in the state.
4. To Recommend Interventions: Identify potential areas of intervention and suggest strategies to enhance the quality of life and economic well-being of transgender individuals in different regions of Kerala.

### **Methods**

Using a strategic sampling approach, participants were handpicked from a range of age categories, work histories, and geographic backgrounds to delve deep into the multifaceted experiences of transgender individuals in Kerala. Five in-depth interviews were meticulously conducted to glean personal narratives, offering a rich tapestry of lived experiences. Alongside, firsthand encounters were documented through direct observation methods. The data was then subjected to theme-based analysis to discern dominant themes and patterns. This primary data was enriched and contextualised through regular consultations with prevailing academic literature, official government documentation, insights from NGO resources, and media articles, ensuring a holistic understanding of the topic at hand.

## Discussion and analysis

In the sociocultural milieu of India, the exploration of gender identity, especially as it pertains to transgender individuals, is a complex and evolving discourse. This investigative study, anchored in qualitative methodologies, seeks to unravel the diverse experiences of transgender persons set against the backdrop of socio-economic determinants. It draws on a comprehensive spectrum of sources, including governmental analyses, civil society publications, and journalistic accounts; the research endeavours to present a nuanced examination of the lived realities of the transgender community in Kerala. By assessing intersections of profession, education, familial ties, and urban-rural divides, the study aims to contribute significantly to the academic understanding of transgender experiences within a unique regional context.

	Age	Profession	Education	Region	Socio-economic status
C1	34	Dance teacher	Bachelor's Degree	Urban	Middle class
C2	36	Makeup Artist	High School	Urban	Middle class
C3	33	Online Trader	Bachelor's Degree, Diploma	Rural	Middle- Upper class
C4	30	IT Professional	Master's Degree	Rural	Middle class
C5	27	Contract Job in Govt Sector	Bachelor's Degree	Urban	Middle class

The professions of C1 and C2 offer a glimpse into the nuances of urban transgender life. For C1, the art of dance in urban settings is a double-edged sword. While cityscapes can be more inclusive, dancing is still marred by traditional gender roles.

*"Finding students willing to learn from a transgender teacher was tough. Parents often pulled their kids out of my classes, whispering excuses or sometimes not offering any. But those few who stayed saw past my gender. They saw the heart and soul I poured into every lesson. Yes, it's been a struggle every single day. But every time I see a child's face light up with the joy of dance, I'm reminded of why I started this journey. Despite everything, dance is my refuge, my solace. Through it, I've found strength, purpose, and a voice to challenge, if not change, society's stereotypes."*

C1's experiences highlight the societal biases that transgender individuals often grapple with in their professions. Yet, their resilience and commitment to their craft underscore the urgent need for greater acceptance and inclusivity. As researchers, we are reminded of art's pivotal role in challenging and reshaping societal perspectives.

On the other hand, C2's choice to be a makeup artist, a field where one's gender identity is gradually becoming more secondary to one's skills, reveals urbanity's slight tilt towards progressive acceptance. She once said,

*"I've faced discrimination, scepticism, even laughter. But here, amidst these brushes and foundations, I found my sanctuary. My clients don't come to me because I'm a transgender makeup artist; they come to me because of my talent. The world outside might still hold prejudices, but in this room, the art speaks. I*

*never imagined a day I'd be recognised for my work, not my gender. But every satisfied client and thankful smile all validate my belief: In the makeup room, my skill truly defines me, not my gender."*

Within the sociological framework, C2's discourse underscores the pervasive gendered prejudices within societal structures. Yet, her trajectory in the makeup domain suggests that specific occupational spheres can function as sanctuaries of meritocracy, where skill supersedes gendered preconceptions, thereby highlighting the potential for micro-level professional enclaves to challenge broader societal hegemonies.

C3's foray into online trading, against the backdrop of a rural setting, speaks to the transformative power of technology in dismantling ground-level prejudices. While rural India often holds more conservative views, the anonymity and vastness of the digital realm offer a unique respite.

*"When I log in, I'm just another trader analysing trends, making moves. No one questions my gender or past; they question my market predictions; it was in this digital landscape that I finally found a place where my skills spoke louder than my identity."*

C4, on the other hand, paints a picture of a rapidly evolving rural India, where traditional occupations are making way for modern, tech-centric roles.

*"I've always been entranced by the world of coding and the systematic allure of technology. While many believed the city would offer me a sanctuary, I found acceptance amidst my roots. As my computer whirred to life in the background, I was reminded of the growing enthusiasm for tech learning in the countryside. My expertise is celebrated in this sector, and my gender is embraced. It's a domain where one's skills intertwine seamlessly with one's identity. Here, technology has not just been about algorithms and codes; it's been a space of true inclusivity, where I stand recognised for who I am and what I can do."*

From an academic lens, the narratives of C3 and C4 elucidate the intersectionality of gender, technology, and rural dynamics in contemporary India. Their stories underscore the potential of technology as a levelling field, transcending conventional boundaries and prejudices associated with gender identities. Both C3 and C4's narratives highlight how the digital realm can serve as an equaliser, blurring the lines of gender and redefining professional landscapes, especially within the dichotomy of urban and rural India.

Formal Employment in Urban Centers: C5's journey in the government sector reveals the evolving landscape of inclusivity as more transgender individuals find their footing in formal roles. Working in an urban environment, within the labyrinth of bureaucracy, C5 faced the rigidity of governmental systems and the nuanced challenges of gender perceptions.

*"On my first day, I could sense the palpable apprehension in the room. Those hesitant glances and murmurs were not unfamiliar to me. But as days turned into weeks, and as we collaborated more closely, those barriers eroded."*

The varied educational backgrounds among our participants reflect the complex interplay between educational attainment and professional choices for transgender individuals. C3 and C4, armed with advanced degrees, find themselves in professions that demand specialised knowledge. This points to the protective shield that higher education can sometimes offer against biases. On the other hand, C2, despite having only a high school education, has carved a niche in the urban artistic domain, suggesting that cities, with their diverse opportunities, can sometimes transcend the barriers of formal education. The stories of C1 and C5 add layers to this narrative, emphasising the multifaceted ways education intersects with the profession and gender identity.



The life journeys of these transgender participants provide invaluable insights into the diverse challenges and aspirations that define their daily realities. Their professional choices, geographical settings, and educational backgrounds convey a story of resilience, aspiration, and the relentless pursuit of authenticity and acceptance in contemporary Kerala.

Family acceptance, a cornerstone for emotional and psychological well-being, becomes even more pivotal for transgender individuals navigating the interwoven fabric of self-identity and societal norms. Analysing the experiences shared, we observe the evolving dynamics of familial relations in the face of gender transitions.

C1's journey from initial resistance to support within their family might be symbolic of how exposure to information and time can dispel ignorance, transforming entrenched beliefs. On the other hand, the estrangement faced by C2 highlights the stark reality many endure, stemming from deeply ingrained conservative values, societal pressures, or a lack of comprehensive understanding of transgender identities. C3's narrative is complex; the family's neutrality might suggest a passive acceptance or avoidance strategy, hinting at underlying discomfort or hope for reversing prior gender norms.

C4's experience is a poignant reminder that families aren't always defined by blood. After facing the loss of biological connections, the support found in friendships embodies the idea that shared experiences, understanding, and genuine acceptance can forge familial bonds that are just as, if not more, profound. Lastly, C5's story echoes C2's, with parental estrangement stemming from possibly a generational gap or a misguided protective instinct.

In essence, these narratives underscore the diverse reactions transgender individuals face within their families. From full embrace to complete rejection, the gradient of acceptance mirrors society's broader spectrum of understanding and attitudes, emphasising the critical need for enhanced advocacy, education, and open dialogue.

In urban centres, there's a tangible sense of community cohesion. The presence of more support groups possibly points to a higher concentration of transgender individuals or perhaps the effects of urbanisation, which often broadens perspectives. Public interactions, however, offer a mixed bag. While the younger generation, likely exposed to a more global perspective and progressive education, seems more accepting, there remain significant pockets of resistance or misunderstanding. Resources in quantity and quality are comparatively more abundant in urban settings. This might be attributed to the larger populace and concentrated infrastructural developments. However, a closer look reveals that the inclusivity of these resources isn't always guaranteed. In the realm of cultural events, their active participation comes with its own set of challenges. Being seen merely as tokens indicates a performative acceptance rather than a genuine one.

Contrastingly, the rural village landscape presents different challenges and experiences. The moderate support observed might arise from the close-knit nature of rural communities where everyone knows everyone else. Yet, this closeness might be a double-edged sword. Public interactions are primarily negative, influenced mainly by elders who, grounded in traditional views, might find it challenging to accept or understand transgender identities. The scarcity of resources in rural areas paints a picture of limited healthcare, educational, and professional opportunities for transgender individuals. Relying on community knowledge emphasises communal ties' crucial role in rural settings.

Regarding cultural events, participation is often typecast into stereotyped roles, hinting at a limited understanding or a reluctance to see beyond conventional norms. Urban areas provide more resources for transgender individuals, yet acceptance remains surface-level. In contrast, rural communities offer

closeness but also face traditional barriers. The journey towards genuine understanding persists in both settings.

The Government Report provides a critical overview of existing policies concerning transsexual individuals. While it acknowledges the Government's commitment to addressing gender disparities, the findings reveal a significant gap between policy intent and practical application. Such disparities emphasise the necessity for robust mechanisms to ensure policies translate into actionable results.

The Government Reports acknowledges policies aimed at transsexual individuals but highlights a significant disconnect in their execution. Although the intentions are commendable, there's a notable lack of understanding at the grassroots level. This oversight often results in policies that might not align with the community's needs. The report suggests enhancing grassroots engagement to ensure policies are both informed by and resonate with the lived experiences of transsexuals. While the framework is in place, a more inclusive and hands-on approach in policy formulation is vital for effective implementation.

Some NGO Publication highlights the positive impact of employment programs for the transsexual community, yet it also emphasises the lingering stigmatisation of mental health issues within this group. Drawing from resources like the 'Trans Empowerment NGO's works, the importance of holistic support becomes apparent. While there's progress in job opportunities, comprehensive well-being requires addressing mental health, too. As such, the publication advocates for expanding employment initiatives and intensifying focus on mental health support.

On the other hand, some articles focus on the real-life stories of individuals, highlighting their struggles, achievements, and aspirations. These articles provide a more balanced view, emphasising the societal challenges faced by the transsexual community while also showcasing their resilience and accomplishments. A notable aspect is the evident urban-rural divide in the narratives. While urban stories might revolve around professional achievements and social acceptance, rural accounts might lean more towards community integration, traditional role conflicts, and resource access challenges.

Given this media landscape, there's a pressing need for sensitisation programs for journalists, ensuring more informed and empathetic reporting. Additionally, an emphasis on sharing more success stories can help create a positive and inspiring narrative for the transsexual community in Kerala.

## **Conclusion**

Through the in-depth analysis presented, it becomes palpably clear that the experiences of transgender individuals in India, particularly Kerala, are intricate and layered. Urban environments, while ostensibly giving opportunities, often house superficial gestures of acceptance, whereas rural landscapes offer unique challenges rooted in traditionalist frameworks. It is evident that while policy and advocacy have made strides at the macro level, there remains a discernible gap in on-ground implementation and tangible inclusivity. The data underscores the pressing need for robust, community-driven interventions and heightened awareness campaigns. The narratives illuminated within this study accentuate the imperative for continued academic inquiry and practical intervention to foster a societal landscape where acceptance of transgender identities transcends mere tokenism and moves towards genuine, holistic integration.

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