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# Promoting Economic Inclusion Of South Asian Transgender Community

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# INTRODUCTION

Transgender is “an umbrella term encompassing those whose gender identities or gender roles differ from those typically associated with the sex assigned at birth.” Trans people may identify themselves as a man, a woman, third gender, or non-binary.

During the pre-colonial era, transgender communities held sacred values and positions in the socio-cultural realm of South Asia. Presently, the trans communities are social outcasts and do not hold the same social status. The Maldives, Bhutan, and Taliban-controlled Afghanistan have criminalized transgender, while Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka legally recognize them. However, legal recognition, majorly, does not include self-identification. As a result, trans individuals unwilling to undergo sex reassignment surgery get alienated from government support services.

## Challenges for Transgender Inclusion in Economy

The ambiguous legal definitions and guidelines on trans rights lead to subjective interpretation by persons in authority. Harassment from bureaucrats is high among trans individuals. Inability to access available resources and excessive harassment from authorities make promoting the economic and social inclusion of the trans community challenging.

Sex work and panhandling are the two dominant income sources for trans individuals. Despite the emergence of better economic opportunities, young trans individuals continue to be isolated from them. Amidst the larger society's existing prejudice, substantial limitation in economic attainment also comes from within the trans community itself.

Within South Asian transgender communities, gurus hold the position of guardians. They mobilize and manage the community members, particularly for their economic sustenance. These senior gurus discourage young members from finding employment outside the stereotyped yet dominant income avenues. The internal restrictions also hinder trans individuals from developing adequate intra- and inter-personal skills.

## Best Practices for Transgender Inclusion in South Asian Economy

South Asian social enterprises are intervening to change the perception within the trans community and that of potential employers. PeriFerry, a non-profit startup based in India, provides skill-development training to trans individuals. Upon training completion, the organization provides the trainees with employment opportunities in the IT, communication, and entrepreneurship sectors

Private companies and non-profit organizations are emerging as allies of trans-inclusion in South Asia. Partnering with transgender advocacy organizations, gendering entry-level corporate roles, and using targeted vacancy advertisements are mechanisms adopted by companies to provide employment opportunities for the trans communities. Companies like Amazon, Accenture India, Unilever Pakistan, and ThoughtWorks are a few leading institutions supporting the trans community's economic inclusion in South Asia.

There is increasing targeted intervention and sensitization among recruiters in the hiring process for trans individuals. Upon hiring, some companies also provide three to six months long training modules for trans individuals, if needed, to adequately develop the required skillsets for enhanced productivity. AkzoNobel India, partners with National Small Industries Corp, to provide training at their dedicated paint academy in Delhi to trans individuals.

But, despite getting competitive salaries and benefits for their engagement, a significant number of hired trans individuals are quitting within a few months of recruitment, primarily due to workplace discrimination. Re-evaluation and re-structuring of infrastructures, resources, and work environment are required to increase retention of transgender employees.



- **Infrastructure Development for Trans Individuals**

Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) initiatives in South Asia are installing gender-neutral toilet facilities in public spaces. Such facilities allow trans individuals to choose between cis-gendered or non-binary toilet facilities based on their comfort level. Trans individuals often face harassment in binary gendered toilets. So, the availability of a third option provides a relatively safer space for trans individuals in public places.

The establishment of non-binary toilet infrastructures in the workplace shows positive outcomes, as observed in Western countries, in employee engagement, employee-workplace relationship, sensitization of work environment, and productivity enhancement of trans employees. South Asian companies should provide a non-binary toilet infrastructural option to develop a more trans-inclusive workplace.

There is growing evidence linking mental health and workplace productivity. Companies are incorporating mental health awareness and counseling services for their employees. When hiring, companies can get counselors more experienced with trans individuals. Prior experience can allow counselors to develop effective targeted interventions within companies. Furthermore, specialized counseling provides a more accommodating environment for transgender employees.



- **Restructuring of Companies' Internal Policies**

### **1. Human Resource Management**

Human resource management plays a vital role in making trans individuals comfortable in the work environment. HR and managers should not disclose trans individuals' identities to other employees without consent. Allowing trans individuals to reveal their identities on their terms fosters a good HR-employee relationship. Furthermore, promoting the usage of trans individuals' preferred pronouns is encouraged. In IBM, employees can choose their pronouns on the internal HR tool.

Trans individuals also have social names. A majority of South Asian countries do not let trans people adopt their social names without gender certification. Countries availing such provisions have a complex bureaucratic process, rendering legal name change challenging. Using social names of trans individuals in companies promotes mental well-being while simultaneously reducing adverse health outcomes. Usage of preferred pronouns and social names enables a welcoming environment for trans employees while promoting sensitization through normalization.

Awareness and sensitization workshops are equally required to foster a positive relationship between employees. Non-profit organizations like Akhuwat, a non-profit organization based in Pakistan, and PeriFerry provide sensitization resources and programs to support transgender awareness in companies. Furthermore, they also conduct routined surveys to ensure the proper implementation of and suggest recommendations, as required, to make policies more trans-friendly. Third-party monitoring and evaluation ensure the company's accountability for promoting transgender inclusivity within the workplace.

## **2. Employee Benefit Packages**

Some trans individuals desire to undergo sex reassignment surgeries. But, the high cost discourages many from doing so, which might negatively impact their perception of themselves. Insurance companies like Ayushman Bharat offer health packages for trans communities, which also cover sex-reassignment surgery costs. The Pakistani government also provides insurance coverage for reconstructive surgery of trans individuals. Companies can capitalize on these on these schemes to ensure the accessibility of their trans employees to appropriate medical insurance packages.

Furthermore, companies like Plum, IBM, Godrej Group, La-Lit, and Tech Mahindra also provide medical insurance coverage for same-sex partners of transgender employees.

Paid leaves for transgender are equally important. Zomato, an Indian company, provides ten-day paid period leave annually for transwomen employees. Ferns N Petals, another Indian company, plans to extend its seven-day paternity leave to any transgender fathers in their permanent employment, provided they have up to two children. Companies should also consider providing paid medical leaves for transgender employees undergoing gender reassignment surgeries.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

From a legal standpoint, South Asia generally has progressive policies to enable the social and economic inclusion of transgender communities in the larger society. But, the ambiguous policies and the complex bureaucratic process alienate trans individuals' access to government support schemes. South Asian non-profit and private sectors are stepping up to promote the economic inclusion of transgender communities. Moving forward, companies should:

1. Increase targeted vacancy advertisements for transgender communities;
2. Provide specialized training, upon hiring, to improve trans employees' skillsets as required for enhanced productivity;
3. Provide optional non-binary toilet in addition to cis-gendered toilet infrastructures for trans employees;
4. Provide specialized professional counseling services to improve the mental well-being of trans employees at the workplace;
5. Conduct awareness and sensitization workshops and seminars across the workplace for the normalization of transgender employees;
6. Involve transgender employees or advocacy organizations in routine monitoring and evaluation of corporate policies and of the work environment;
7. Provide appropriate medical insurance catering to the needs of transgender employees;
8. Avail paid leaves for transmen and transwomen as provisioned for cis-gendered employees in addition to appropriate paid medical leaves for transgender employees undergoing sex reassignment surgeries.

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