

Factors Associated with a Meaningful Life for Transgender Women in India: Implications for Social Work Practice

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Abstract

Transgender women in India face several challenges due to their exclusion from society. In this context, it is important to understand the level of meaning in their lives apart from describing their everyday problems. The present study (n = 127) that used the Meaning in Life Questionnaire to measure this construct has revealed that apart from often experiencing sexual, verbal, and physical abuse, the majority of the respondents had a low presence of meaning in their lives. Two case studies have also been included, and suggestions on how social workers could help make a positive difference have been laid out.

Keywords: Meaningful Life, Transgender, **Wellbeing**, Social Work Practice, India.

Introduction

Sadly, **the exclusion of sexual and gender minorities** begins at school (Elia & Eliason, 2010), and in a world where there is increasing discussion on the importance of inclusion and equality of opportunity for all, it is deeply disturbing to note that more than 70 countries in the world today still continue to criminalize, in one way or the other, the lives of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) individuals (McIntosh, 2021). In India, the transgender community continues to live on the margins of society and faces stigma, apart from socio-economic and educational exclusion (Pandya & Redcay, 2021). The 2011 census of India has noted that there are 4.88 million transgender individuals, of whom some are **present in gender-affirming clothes**, whereas others also undergo medical treatment to fully transition from their sex assigned at birth (Arvind et al., 2022). Irrespective of the group to which they belong, **transgender and non-binary individuals are denied the** dignity and respect that every human deserves by the virtue of being born human, and as a result, they also miss out on educational opportunities.

In one recent Indian study on the transgender community, for example, it was found that the single largest majority of the respondents had only a secondary level of school education (Bhattacharya & Ghosh, 2020). **This is in contrast with the data on cis-gender girls in India which suggests that the single largest percentage of cis-gender girls have enrolled in high school (Chauhan, 2024).** This automatically puts transgender women on a path of economic disempowerment. It also reduces their scope for securing white-collar jobs. **In this context, while some choose sex work as a profession, others choose it as a last resort (Ganju & Saggurti, 2017) or engage in beggary (Saria, 2019).** Both of these professions are unfortunately looked down upon in Indian society, although certain significant gains have been made to help provide some recognition to sex work as a profession. Recently, the Supreme Court of India has recognized sex work as a profession (Chowdhury, 2022). Yet, sex work in India is not entirely legal. According to the Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act in India, sex work can only be carried out privately and not in brothels. Furthermore, soliciting is deemed illegal as well (Swathisha & Deb, 2022). This semi-legal nature of sex work in the country has led to members of the transgender community, many of whom are engaged in sex work, being victimized repeatedly. They often face

financial exploitation at the hands of law enforcement authorities as well as thugs, partly due to a paucity of legal measures to protect them from such harassment and exploitation (Virupaksha et al., 2016) and partly due to the trans-aphetic nature of society (Bahadur & Kumar, 2016). **In India, there is a high level of diversity among the transgender population although they are generally discriminated upon by society as a whole. One of the hallmarks of this discrimination is the lack of sufficient interest in many national-level studies on their current status. In fact, the only comprehensive data regarding their status is from the 2011 Census data, which suggested that there were about 4.88 million transgender individuals in the country, with the single largest majority (28 percent) of them living in the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh (Mal & Mundu, 2023) Furthermore, two thirds (66 percent) of them resided in rural areas (Mal & Mundu, 2023). Their literacy rate was about 56 percent which was below the then national average and their unemployment rate was much higher than the national average as well (Mal & Mundu, 2023). Therefore, socio-economically, they have always remained disempowered and unfortunately continue to remain so (Mal & Mundu, 2023).**

Disempowerment of Transgender Women in India

Apart from the lack of legal support, the other major issue is the scantiness of medical and psychological support for transgender women. Since public hospitals in India do not conduct free gender re-assignment surgery, some transgender women are forced to opt for a traditional but highly risky and painful form of transitioning called *Dai Nirvan*, which involves the removal of the male genitals in a non-hospital setting (Singh et al., 2014). There have also been reports of urethral closing as a side effect of this non-medically approved and dangerous form of transitioning (Singh et al., 2014). Furthermore, almost two-thirds of the transgender population in India do not have access to treatment for sexually transmitted infections, and about 14.5 percent of transgender women in India are infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) (Ming et al., 2016). These factors could be adversely impacting the mental health of the members of the transgender community since physical health and mental health are known to be closely related. Additionally, in one recent study, it was discovered that the pandemic had a greater negative impact on the mental health of transgender youth than cisgender youth (Hawke et al., 2021). Even before the pandemic struck the world, transgender women in India were suffering due to social exclusion, and they continue to do so. It is worth considering the possibility that

this social exclusion could impact their self-esteem (Shaikh et al., 2016) and mental health in general. One of the hallmarks of poor mental health in a community is the suicide rate, which among **transgender persons**, is very alarming. It is estimated that the suicide rate among **transgender persons** in India is 31 percent, with about 50 percent of **transgender persons** attempting suicide at least once before their 20th birthday (Virupaksha et al., 2016). Moreover, the notion that the mental health of transgender women deserves greater attention is supported by a recent meta-analysis of several studies on this matter. The meta-analysis revealed that there is indeed a higher prevalence of mental health disorders among **transgender individuals** than among the general population (Pinna et al., 2022). This calls for a deeper investigation into the mental health of **transgender persons including transgender women** in countries such as India in particular, where there is a tremendous gap between the need for mental health services and their availability for the general population (Lahariya, 2018). **In general, access to mental health services for the transgender community remains poor, with only a few HIV interventions in the country employing special counselors to provide mental health support for transgender women (Chakrapani et al., 2017). Apart from the stigma and other exclusionary practices that may act as barriers for many transgender individuals in accessing mental health care facilities, there are also other technical problems. For example, since the majority of the transgender individuals live in rural areas where there isn't proper access to internet facilities, many may not be able to access online counseling facilities, which are generally available to the general population living in urban areas (Mascarenhas, 2024). Also, due to the poor economic status of the majority of the members of the community, paid mental health services remain beyond the reach of many. If even the typical cisgender individual in the country is struggling to access mental health services, one can only imagine how out of reach these services are for a transgender individual who is socially excluded and harassed by several groups in society.**

What is interesting is that, despite all these hurdles, the transgender community in India has not allowed itself to be entirely bogged down by its struggles, and the community still continues to exist and grow. In other words, there are signs that indicate that the community has managed to retain its resilience, especially at the micro level, despite all the odds that have been stacked against them (Ganju & Saggurti, 2017). This resilience could originate from a deep sense of meaning and purpose, and this meaning and purpose in life are known to help

reduce stress and promote mental well-being (Ostafin & Proulx, 2020). This aspect deserves more attention and investigation, especially in the context of transgender women in India, so that new and relatively unexplored factors could be identified and promoted to help improve the mental well-being of transgender women who are in great need of care and support.

Meaning in Life

In simple terms, meaning in life refers to people's belief that their lives are significant beyond the temporary situation they are in (Steger, 2009). This construct, though not new, has gained increased attention from researchers in the past two decades (Morgan & Farsides, 2009; Glaw et al., 2017; King & Hicks, 2021). It is important to note that meaning in life is not a replacement for mental health or mental well-being as a construct. Rather, it is to be perceived as a component or cause of mental well-being (Steger et al., 2006). The challenge, however, lies in measuring it, and after several decades of research into this line of thought, researchers have managed to develop accurate tools for measuring meaning in life.

Review of Literature

Over the years, researchers have attempted to measure the mental wellbeing of transgender individuals from different perspectives. For example, in one study aimed at examining life satisfaction, loneliness, mental health, and suicidal behavior among transgender students in Norway (Anderssen et al., 2020), it was found that when compared to cis-gender students, the transgender students more frequently experienced mental health problems, were more likely to be lonely and suicidal, and were less satisfied with their lives (Anderssen et al., 2020). The findings of that particular study are in line with previous literature that suggests that due to several risk factors, such as gender-based discrimination, including harassment by family members, the public, and the police, the rates of suicidal behavior among transgender individuals are high and range from 32-50 percent across all countries (Virupaksha et al., 2016), which is deeply worrying. In fact, the lack of social support and higher levels of discrimination appear to be important predictors of poor mental health among transgender individuals (Trujillo et al., 2017; Witcomb et al., 2018). These findings indicate that transgender individuals living in countries where they are highly discriminated and often excluded from mainstream society are also likely to face

poor mental wellbeing. In India, transgender women face many of these struggles including the lack of proper access to healthcare facilities (Pandya & Redcay, 2021).

Research Gap

In such a scenario, there is an urgent need to examine the level of meaning in the lives of transgender women in the Indian context to note their daily challenges and to identify factors that could possibly help improve the level of meaning in their lives, thereby improving their overall mental wellbeing as well. Despite a significant number of transgender women living in the country, there have been no previous studies examining this important construct among this population, and in order to fill this existing research gap, the present study is being undertaken. Hence, the purpose of the present study is twofold-to measure the level of meaning in life among a group of transgender women in the city of Bengaluru as well as those living outside the city and to identify the specific factors that are associated with the meaning in life among the members of the community. Bengaluru, which was formerly known as Bangalore, is the capital city of the state of Karnataka in India and is also known as the Silicon Valley of India due to the large presence of tech companies (Guttikunda et al., 2019). Apart from these two objectives, the researchers also aim to identify other challenges faced by members of the transgender community in India.

Methodology

Universe and Sampling

A significant challenge in this area of research is the accessibility of respondents. The members of the transgender community experience social exclusion and stigma in the country (Jose & V., 2014), and as a result, they are a hard-to-reach population. Since a sizable number of the members of the transgender community are engaged in begging and sex work in small settlements to make ends meet (Nuttbrock, 2018), data were initially collected from 10 settlements in Bengaluru city, the capital of the State of Karnataka. A total of 151 members of the transgender community **pursuing various occupations** were living in these settlements. Out of these, 68 respondents met the inclusion criteria and were willing to be part of the study. These 68 respondents then referred other potential respondents from other states in India (Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala), and data from another 59 respondents who met the inclusion criteria from these other states were collected. **It may**

be noted that the initial 68 respondents were requested to refer respondents from various age groups, social backgrounds, and occupations so as to ensure as much as diversity as possible. Thus, data were collected from 127 respondents in total. The motive behind collecting data from respondents from multiple states was to ensure greater diversity in the sample.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Only those respondents who were 18 and above, those who openly identified themselves as **transgender** women, and those who were willing to be part of the study were included. Women who could not understand English were excluded from the study as the interview schedule was in English.

Time Frame of the Study

The present study was conducted over a period of four months between June 2023 to September 2023.

Tools of Data Collection

A self-prepared interview schedule was used to collect data from the respondents. The interview schedule had three parts. The first half of the schedule contained questions regarding the socio-demographic, economic, and other basic details. The second part of the schedule contained items that have been found to be associated with meaning in life in other studies involving cisgender individuals. These included statements that measured the level of optimism, feelings of loneliness, being a giver, taking care of children, praying, listening, sleeping, reading, and meditating (Baumeister et al., 2013). The second part also included statements regarding different forms of violence, as transgender women do experience different forms of violence on a regular basis (Dutta et al., 2019). Finally, there was an item on harassment by law enforcement authorities for practicing sex work or begging (Ganju & Saggurti, 2017). The responses or all of the items in the second half of the interview schedule were measured on a five-point Likert scale, with the responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

The third half of the interview schedule comprised a standardized scale to measure meaning in life among the respondents. This scale has a total of 10 items with two dimensions of meaning in life (Steger et al., 2006). The first dimension measures the presence of meaning in the respondents' lives, while the second dimension measures the search for meaning, that is, the extent to which the respondents are searching for

meaning and understanding in their lives (Steger et al., 2006). The responses are measured on a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 representing the response- absolutely untrue and 7 representing the response-absolutely true. While items 1, 4, 5, 6, and 9 constitute the sub-scale-presence of meaning, items- 2, 3, 7, 8, and 10 make up the search for meaning sub-scale. A higher score in each of the sub-scales represents a higher score in both dimensions, that is, meaning in life and the search for meaning. The researchers chose to adopt this particular scale as it is one of the most reliable measures of meaning in life that are currently available (Steger et al., 2006). As far as the scoring of the scale is concerned, the author of the scale has set 24 as the cut-off score for each sub-scale, and this cut-off value is used as a proxy to determine whether the respondents have scored high or low in each of the sub-scales (Steger, 2010). Furthermore, the researchers conducted a reliability test and discovered a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.811, indicating that the scale is, in fact, reliable (Taber, 2018). Each interview took about 20 minutes. The collected data were entered into PSPP, a free data analysis software (Sto. -Tomas et al., 2019), and stored on a password-protected computer.

Analysis of Data

A percentage analysis was carried out to describe the characteristics of the respondents, the level of meaning in their lives, and to shed light on the intensity of the problems faced by them. In situations where the independent variables were nominal in nature, a series of Kruskal Wallis tests were employed to test the association between the independent variables and the dependent variable. Kruskal Wallis test was used as it is more effective compared to the One-Way Analysis of Variance when the data is not normally distributed (Hecke, 2012). Furthermore, Spearman's rank correlation was used when the independent variables were ordinal in nature (Sedgwick, 2014).

Ethical considerations

The ethical approval for conducting the study was secured from the first author's institution (Ref No. SJU-SW-01). Furthermore, informed consent was obtained from the respondents. The respondents were assured that no personal data, such as names, phone numbers, or email addresses that could be used to identify them would be collected. Additionally, the authors have adhered to the principles laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2022) to ensure the ethical nature of the study.

Results

Quantitative Data

In order to gain an insight into the basic characteristics of the respondents, the researchers collected and analyzed data regarding the socio-demographic and economic features of the respondents. The results of this analysis can be seen in Table 1. **While a slight majority (53.5 percent) of the respondents live in Bengaluru, the remaining hail from other states. The mean age of the respondents was found to be 36.23 years, with the majority (62.2 percent) of the respondents aged 31 years and above, although more than one-third (37.8 percent) of the respondents aged between 18-30 years.** Some of the other interesting findings from this table include the fact that the single largest majority of the respondents (42.5 percent) hail from the scheduled caste community, which is a marginalized section of society that has been discriminated against by mainstream society for centuries (Borooah et al., 2015), leading to significant economic disparities (Madheswaran & Singhari, 2016). In India, the caste system, a system of social stratification, invisibly continues to be a tool for perpetuating discrimination to the point that those who belong to the lower castes or scheduled castes sometimes struggle to access clean drinking water (Dutta et al., 2015). Although a significant number of the total respondents are employed in the private sector, sex work (18.1 percent) and begging (19.1 percent) are the occupations of more than one-third of the total respondents, which is similar to the number reported in another recent study (Manpreet et al., 2021). The level of education of the respondents, as seen in Table 1, is another indication of the disempowerment faced by them. The single largest majority (45.7 percent) of the respondents have dropped out of high school, and the possible reason for this is a combination of poverty and discrimination. Finally, the single largest majority of the respondents live on less than \$120 a month, which is a very small income, especially for those living in metropolitan cities such as Bengaluru, the Silicon Valley of India (Bharath et al., 2018), which is known for its comparatively higher cost of living. All these challenges put together reflect a very difficult life indeed.

Challenges Faced by Transgender Women

As discussed in one of the previous sections, it has been reported by other studies that the transgender community in India has been traditionally sidelined and discriminated against (Pandya & Redcay, 2021; Ganju & Saggurti, 2017). The researchers wished to further investigate this matter through the present study by

examining certain aspects of the lives of transgender women in India, where certain forms of discrimination and victimization have been reported. The results of this inquiry can be observed in Table 2, which provides us with a detailed understanding of some of the most common problems faced by transgender women in India. While the majority of the respondents agree with the statement that they often experience sexual abuse at the hands of people/clients, the single largest majority of the respondents agreed to the fact that they often experience verbal abuse as well as physical abuse, apart from being harassed by law enforcement authorities for practicing sex work/begging, which is one of the major occupations of the transgender community in India. Furthermore, a significant percentage of the total respondents also felt that they were looked down upon by society. These findings are indicative of a deep and systemic problem that involves discrimination against the transgender community in India. In fact, it has been argued that among all the marginalized sections of Indian society, perhaps the transgender community is the one that is most ignored (Kurian & Manoj, 2021). Another inference that can be made from the results in Table 2 is that, on the one hand, the transgender community in India faces various forms of violence, discrimination, and exclusion at the hands of the public, and on the other side, they are prone to being harassed by law enforcement authorities since sex work, a major occupation of the members of the transgender community, is not entirely legal in the country (Panchanadeswaran, 2017).

Presence of Meaning

As mentioned previously, the meaning in life questionnaire has two dimensions- the presence of meaning and the search for meaning (Steger et al., 2006). The first dimension, that is, the presence of meaning, examines cognitive appraisals of how meaningful the respondents find their lives to be (Bailey & Phillips, 2016). Since one of the major objectives of the present study is to examine the independent factors associated with the meaning in life among the respondents, the researchers carried out a series of Spearman's rank correlation tests to identify those significant factors that are correlated with the sub-scale- presence of meaning. Spearman's rank correlation was chosen as the data were not found to be normally distributed, and it is believed that Spearman's rank correlation is more powerful when the data is not normally distributed (Zar, 2014). The results of these analyses can be found in Table 3. It is interesting to note that there is a statistically significant and negative correlation between the days of working in a month and the presence of meaning. Moreover,

monthly income is also seen to be negatively correlated with the presence of the meaning dimension. This is contrary to existing research on the matter (Ward & King, 2016). In order to understand this result, one has to re-examine the results in Table 1, wherein it can be observed that more than one-third of the respondents make a living through sex work and begging, both of which are unregulated, with sex work being partly illegal (Swathisha & Deb, 2022). This, combined with the traditional exclusion of the transgender community from mainstream society, opens them up to harassment from both the public and law enforcement authorities. This reality is reflected in Table 2, wherein the majority of the respondents have expressed that they have been facing this issue. All of this amounts to the lack of a safe working environment for a significant number of the respondents, which in turn is possibly causing them to question the presence of meaning in their lives. On the other hand, enjoying being around children, reading books, and being optimistic about the future, were all positively and significantly correlated with the respondents' presence of meaning, which is in line with the existing literature (Baumeister et al., 2013).

Search for Meaning

The second dimension of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) is the search for meaning, which is a dynamic effort to find some purpose and significance in life (Bailey & Phillips, 2016). The search for meaning is indicative of the fact that the respondents feel that they currently lack sufficient meaning and are, therefore, trying to find a higher purpose in life. In order to understand the factors that are associated with the search for meaning in life, a series of Kruskal Wallis tests were carried out. Only those results that were statistically significant were included in Table 4. The results indicate that those who live alone had no one to support them while transitioning, and those who urgently felt the need to undergo surgery (but were unable to go through it, mostly due to financial constraints) were more intensely searching for meaning than their counterparts. This finding is supported by a highly cited meta-analysis that revealed that the mental health of trans women generally improves following gender-confirming medical intervention (Dhejne et al., 2016). The results also suggest that for respondents in the present study, the support derived from living in a community that can offer them comfort is indeed psychologically helpful.

Level of Meaning

Apart from the significant factors that were found to be associated with both dimensions of meaning in life, the researchers wanted to discover and summarize the current state of the respondents in terms of their level of meaning in life. Since the present scale has two sub-scales that are to be viewed independently, the researchers used the scoring guidelines provided by the author of the scale (Steger, 2010). Based on the scoring guidelines, the scores were classified, and the results are displayed in Table 5. The results in Table 5 indicate that in the present study, a vast majority (94.5 percent) of the respondents scored below 24 in the presence of meaning dimension, while a sizeable majority (73.2 percent) scored high in the search for the meaning dimension of the scale. The interpretation provided by Steger (2010), was then used to understand these results. According to Steger (2010), a score below 24 in the presence of the meaning dimension and a score of 24 and above in the search for meaning dimension means that the respondents probably feel that their life has no meaning or purpose and that they are actively searching for that meaning. It means that the respondents are not always satisfied with their lives and that they do not experience love or joy very often. There is also a high probability that the respondents are questioning the role of religion in their lives, indicating the dire situation in which they are in.

Qualitative Data

Case Study 1

X is a 50-year-old transwoman living in Bengaluru. She grew up in Mangalore and has felt feminine ever since she can remember, and she liked wearing her sister's clothes while growing up. However, her parents never accepted her feminine side and wanted her to behave like a boy. She was harassed and bullied in school, and because of the harassment and bullying, she kept shifting schools. She changed about five schools, looking for acceptance in each school she went to, but most of her classmates would taunt and bully her by stating things like- "hudige hogthe idha nodu" (look, there goes a woman). As she was growing up, she would always reflect on this question "Who am I?". {If I'm not a male (a gender that I've been assigned at birth), then am I a female?" Her parents were not literate and didn't understand why she was not behaving like a typical boy. Her physical education teacher would not allow her to play any group sports with the boys because she was feminine. She was permitted to take part only in athletics and other individual sports. When she was in the 4th

grade, her physical education teacher would hit her many times and force her to walk more like a 'boy'. **She remembers him saying, "Why are you positioning your buttocks like a girl? Walk like a boy!"** Once, as a student staying in a hostel, about 15 boys got together and sexually abused her. They removed her clothes to check on her genitals. She also recounts that she has been sexually abused several times. After moving to many schools, she completed her Bachelor of Arts and studied law at Mangalore University. When she began practicing law, she once again faced the same bullying and harassment that she had faced during her younger days. **For example, she received comments such as "Hey, why do you sound like a woman?" In fact, in one instance, she heard one of her clients telling others, "She shouldn't be representing us because she sounds like a woman."** Today, the bullies who harassed her, are doing very well in life. After being humiliated by her client, X stopped practicing law and hasn't gone back since then. In order to make a living, she began working as a cook through various agencies and has also worked as a daily wage laborer. In the year 2015, she joined the transgender community. Her own family has threatened to shoot and kill her because they feel that she has brought dishonor to the family by accepting her trans-identity.

She emphasizes that only in the past 10 to 12 years have there been a few concrete government schemes for the transgender community. In the year 2015, when she officially joined the transgender community, she felt supported. In 2015 and 2016, she underwent silicone and bottom surgeries. After her surgeries, she felt very satisfied with her identity. In 2017 and 2018, she worked in the corporate sector. Unfortunately, she lost her job during the pandemic. Even today, she states that neither she nor the members of her community can go to the police station and complain directly against her biological family due to the fear of repercussions. She now depends on the community to earn a living. She believes that in order to gain something, one has to lose something. She says that she lost her friends and biological family, but she likes her new life after transitioning. She feels that she has some small amount of meaning in her life but wants to find a greater purpose. This is why she wants to attempt and clear a law-based exam in order to re-enter the field of law. Throughout her life, she has financially supported the education of 21 young students, whom she feels are her children. She's proud that, despite all the suffering that she has endured at the hands of society, she has made a positive difference in the lives of others. **She says, "I don't feel like I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm fighting for survival."**

Case Study 2

Z was born male, but she feels like a woman trapped in a male body. She is currently 32 years old, is on hormone therapy, and has **breast implants**. She would like to go through the surgery, but due to a lack of familial support and financial problems, she is unable to do so. She always wanted to be a woman while growing up. **She says, “I hate dressing up like a man.”** She says her family never understood her. She doesn’t live with her family anymore. She lives in Bengaluru. When she was in the 8th grade, her family members harassed her for being feminine. When she came to Bengaluru from her hometown, she began begging at traffic signals. **She says, “I had to make a living somehow.”** Then she met with a few transgender women from the community and eventually began engaging in sex work and begging for survival. She says that the police demand that she give them some money whenever they see her. If she refuses to give it, they physically abuse her. Therefore, she bribes them in order to continue begging and sex work. She feels that there aren’t any schemes to support women like her and that only non-governmental organizations are supporting them. She wishes to undergo a transitioning surgery, but it is expensive. In order to be able to afford to undergo the surgery, she needs to continue with sex work and begging and save money. Like X, Z was also bullied in school. Moreover, her physical education teacher sexually abused her in school. She feels that she has little to no meaning in life and **says, “ I am scared of what is ahead of me.” “I want to stop begging and get another job after I transition”.**

Discussion

The present study has revealed a plethora of disturbing realities regarding the living conditions of members of the transgender community in India, apart from highlighting some clear violations of human rights that they experience on a regular basis in the form of harassment by both the members of the public/clients and law enforcement authorities for practicing sex work. This is a violation of Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees the right to work, including favorable conditions for work (United Nations, 1948). Although one can attribute the poor living conditions of the members to the greyness of the law with respect to sex work in India, wherein sex work is deemed legal only under certain circumstances

(Narayan et al., 2023), the dismissive attitude of society towards these women is inexcusable. The fact that a significant number of the members of the transgender community in the present study feel that they are often looked down upon by society is evidence of this dismissive attitude of society towards **gender minorities**, such as the transgender community in India. The finding that the single largest majority of the respondents in the present study have dropped out of school and have an income of less than \$120 a month is also disturbing. This is reflective of the unwillingness of schools in India to consider the special needs of transgender students, **such as protection against bullying due to their gender identity, the need for counseling their parents on this issue, and also to sensitize teachers about various gender identities, apart from ensuring gender neutral bathrooms,** leading to high dropout rates among them and forcing them into a life of poverty and disempowerment. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the school system in India to ensure a more inclusive environment for trans students and to develop and implement programs that can offer adult literacy for members of the transgender community, who were formerly denied an equal opportunity to be educated. The present study has also revealed that while a significant number of the respondents are employed in the private sector or are engaged in sex work and begging to make ends meet, a very small number of them are employed by the government. As a democratic nation and as an early adopter of the concept of human rights, it is the responsibility of the state to formulate policies and enact laws that offer more job opportunities for **gender minorities** which include the transgender community. The open and often overlooked verbal, physical, and sexual violence experienced by the transgender community has to be taken seriously by the state. India currently has an Act to prevent atrocities against the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes (Saxena, 2018). Similarly, there is a dire need for legislation that offers special protection for members of the transgender community from all forms of violence. All of these factors need to be taken into account while examining the level of meaning in life experienced by the respondents. As far as the level of meaning is concerned, the majority of the respondents having a low presence of meaning and a high search for meaning is largely reflective of the daily struggles of the members of this marginalized community. A meaningful life is possible when an individual and their work are valued, respected, and encouraged by society as an attempt to move forward in life. However, when society discriminates against women and punishes them for engaging in an occupation of their choice, it is bound to negatively impact the self-image of the women in question and also

make them feel as though their lives are less meaningful, thereby motivating them to desperately search for a purpose that can make them feel fulfilled. Societal attitudes towards the transgender community, as well as those of the law enforcement authorities, need to change for the better in this regard. Finally, the results point to the fact that apart from greater support for the choice of employment, establishing a better system of protection from harassment and violence, and providing another opportunity for education, there is also a need for greater support for youth who wish to transition, if the aim is to give them an opportunity to lead more meaningful and satisfying lives.

Conclusion

In India, the transgender community includes various sub-groups, some of which include- Hijras, eunuchs, Kothis, Aravanis, Jogappas, Shiv-Shakthis (Indian Institute of Legal Studies, 2017). The Hijras are born male but dress in feminine ways and have their own sub-groups. Some of them are as follows: Khusra: Individuals who are hermaphrodites or intersexed, Aquas who are cross-dressers; Transsexual Zananay: who identify as impotent males; Khoja/Chhinni: Individuals who are born male and opt for castration, Chhibri: Who are biologically female but identify as transgender (Mal, 2018). Despite this complex diversity, the Hijras are often discriminated against, which is bound to affect their mental health. It is important to understand that the feeling of living a life without meaning, currently experienced by many of the respondents in the present study, does not translate to an internal problem that is isolated from reality. It is in fact, a reflection of the unjust and patriarchal violence lashed out against members of the transgender community in India. In this regard, it is necessary for social workers to help members of this community realize that their feelings of inadequacy or helplessness are not a reflection of who they are but rather a reflection of the unfair economic and political system that has systematically excluded them. There is a need for lobbying for policies that can bring out systemic changes in how the transgender community is viewed in the country. At the community level, there is a need to conduct awareness campaigns on the existing rights of the members, ideally conducted by social workers. For example, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 has certain provisions that prohibit discrimination against transgender women in the context of education, employment, healthcare, and housing (Bhattacharya et al., 2022). An awareness campaign on these provisions with a humanist perspective would enable the members of the community to understand not only the

provision in isolation but also the all-important societal and patriarchal context **linked to heteronormativity and cisnormativity** that the provisions are aimed to address. However, this law once again has significant loopholes that need to be addressed through lobbying by social workers. For example, as per the provisions of the Act, an individual cannot change their perceived gender identity without a sex-re-assignment surgery (Bhattacharya et al., 2022), thereby preventing many transgender women from being legally recognized as a transgender person. Another necessary step that could be undertaken is a careful re-evaluation of the existing syllabus of social work in universities and colleges. There is an urgent requirement to include more papers on **gender minorities** and their challenges that are rarely studied. This could help inspire a generation of future social workers who have greater empathy for transgender women. The present study has revealed that the lives of members of the transgender community in the country are filled with the struggle for economic empowerment and freedom from harassment. This, combined with regressive societal notions, according to which the members of this community are viewed as less than equal to others, is a huge hurdle for policymakers, activists, and civil society to overcome. The suffering of members of the transgender community has led many to question the presence of meaning in their lives and has motivated them to actively search for it. The harassment faced at the workplace, along with the lack of sufficient governmental and societal support for transitioning, has led many to feel that their lives are not as meaningful as they ought to be. Thus, there is an urgent need for lawmakers to pay close attention to the condition of the members of the transgender community in India and to pass laws that can help protect them from various forms of violence and empower them economically so that they can live a life filled with dignity and meaning, which must be ensured and protected, not just by the state, but also by the citizens of the country. **Additionally, future studies could focus on transgender men and non-binary individuals who are notably absent from this study. Moreover, longitudinal research can track how changes in laws and healthcare access impact transgender women over time. There is also a need for culturally sensitive social work practices that account for regional differences across India. This would ensure that the findings and recommendations are practically applicable.**

Limitations of the Study

Although the present study did touch upon the problems faced by the members of the transgender community in the country, a bit more attention could have been paid to the discrimination faced by those who are specifically working as sex workers **and those who are working in the private sector** as there is a paucity of research on this. **Furthermore, due to the lack of data on the exact size of the universe and the vast spread of the population, the researchers adopted a non-probability sampling technique- snowball sampling, which might limit the generalizability of the findings. It is hoped that researchers in the future will keep these limitations in mind and aim to fill the existing gaps.**

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The researchers would like to state that there are no competing interests to declare.

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Data Availability

The dataset associated with the present study is publicly available at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.24225724>

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Variables	N	%	\bar{x} (min) (max)
Location of the Respondents			
Bengaluru	68	53.5	
Other cities in India	59	46.5	
Caste			
Scheduled Caste	54	42.5	
Scheduled Tribe	08	6.3	
Other Backward Castes	26	20.5	
General Category	39	30.7	
Type of Family			
Living Alone/Nuclear Family	39	30.7	
Living with the Community	88	69.3	
Age Group (in years)			
18-30	48	37.8	36.23 (19) (79)
31 and above	79	62.2	
Level of Education			
Dropped out before high school	58	45.7	
High school	39	30.7	
Undergraduate	24	18.9	
Masters	06	4.7	
Occupation			
Sex work	23	18.1	
Begging	25	19.7	
Government sector	02	1.5	
Private sector	66	52	
Unemployed/Not working	11	8.7	
Number of days working in a month			
0-10 days	49	38.6	15.33 (0) (30)
11-20 days	40	31.5	
21 days or above	38	29.9	
Monthly income (Rs. converted to \$)			
Below Rs. 10,000 (below \$120)	81	63.8	\$135 (\$0) (\$722)
Rs.10,000 to 20,000 (\$120-\$240)	34	26.8	
Rs. 20,001 and above (above \$240)	12	9.4	

Table 1- Socio-demographic and economic features of the respondents.

Variables	N (127)	%
I am looked down upon by everyone in society.		
Strongly disagree	01	0.8
Disagree	14	11
Neither agree nor disagree	47	37
Agree	44	34.6
Strongly agree	21	16.6
I am often chased or harassed by law enforcement authorities for practicing sex work/begging		
Strongly disagree	2	1.6
Disagree	7	5.5
Neither agree nor disagree	42	33.1
Agree	60	47.2
Strongly agree	16	12.6
I often experience verbal abuse at the hands of people/clients		
Strongly disagree	1	0.8
Disagree	9	7.1
Neither agree nor disagree	40	31.5
Agree	62	48.8
Strongly agree	15	11.8
I often experience physical abuse at the hands of people/clients		
Strongly disagree	1	0.8
Disagree	10	7.9
Neither agree nor disagree	42	33.1
Agree	63	49.6
Strongly agree	11	8.6
I often experience sexual abuse at the hands of people/clients		
Strongly disagree	2	1.6
Disagree	10	7.9
Neither agree nor disagree	37	29.1
Agree	67	52.7
Strongly agree	11	8.7

Table 2- Challenges faced by transgender women

1	Days working in a month	Monthly Income	Optimistic about future	Love taking care of children	Love reading books	Presence of Meaning
Days working in a month	1	0.538 Sig. 0.000	-0.097 Sig. 0.280	-0.093 Sig. 0.299	-0.083 Sig. 0.354	-0.152* Sig. 0.089
Monthly Income	0.538*** Sig. 0.000	1	-0.25 Sig. 0.782	-0.49 Sig. 0.586	0.018 Sig. 0.838	-0.164* Sig. 0.066
Optimistic about future	-0.97 Sig. 0.280	-0.025 Sig. 782	1	0.106 Sig. 0.234	0.166 Sig. 0.062	0.228* Sig 0.10
Enjoy taking care of children	-0.93 Sig. 0.299	-0.049 Sig. 0.566	0.106 Sig. 0.234	1	0.279 Sig. 0.001	0.177** Sig. 0.047
Love reading books	-0.083 Sig. 0.354	0.018 Sig 0.988	0.166 Sig. 0.062	0.279 Sig. 0.001	1	0.152* Sig. 0.088
Presence of Meaning	0.152 Sig 0.089	-0.164 Sig. 0.066	0.228 Sig. 0.10	0.177 Sig. 0.47	0.152 Sig. 0.088	1

**** Significant at 0.05 level. * Significant at 0.10 level**

Table 3- Spearman's Rank Correlation between presence of meaning and select independent variables

Type of Family					
Living Alone/ Nuclear Family	N	\bar{x} rank	KW-H	df	p value
	39	72.95	3.372	1	0.066*
Living with the Community	88	60.03			
Who supported you in accepting your new gender?					
Self	45	76.54	8.934	3	0.030**
Peers	8	53.88			
Members of the transgender community	73	57.87			
Relatives	1	28.00			
Do you wish to undergo surgery to transition?					
Yes	11	83.27	4.866	2	0.088*
No	14	73.46			
Already undergone surgery	102	60.62			

**** Statistically significant at a moderate level ($p < 0.05$)**

*** Statistically significant at a marginal level ($p < 0.10$)**

Table 4-Kruskal Wallis Test- Factors Associated with Search for Meaning (n = 127)

Presence of Meaning			
Scores	Frequency	Percent	\bar{x} (min) (max)
Below 24	120	94.5	19.20 (11) (28)
24 and above	7	5.5	
Search for Meaning			
Below 24	34	26.8	25.40 (10) (35)
24 and above	93	73.2	

Table 5- Level of Meaning