

## Exploring the Experiences of Transgender Children from Diverse Backgrounds in India: An Intersectional Approach

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This study examines the experiences of transgender children in India, focusing on their gender expression and its impact on psychological well-being. Despite growing awareness of transgender issues in the country, many transgender youths continue to face significant challenges, including social stigma, discrimination, and mental health difficulties. Employing a qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), interviews were conducted with eight transgender children, aged 10 to 17, from varied caste and socio-economic backgrounds. The findings indicate that transgender youth modify their gender expression based on different social contexts, with caste and socio-economic factors playing a crucial role in shaping their access to affirming resources. Additionally, family acceptance and social validation were identified as key elements in promoting self-esteem and mitigating dysphoria. These insights highlight the importance of intersectional strategies that consider both social and economic barriers in supporting the well-being of transgender children in India.

**Keywords:** Transgender Youth, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, Social Stigma, Intersectionality, Mental Health Support.

Children who identify as transgender experience a disparity between their gender identity and the gender assigned at birth. Over recent years in India, there has been a notable rise in awareness regarding transgender issues, which has bolstered visibility and advocacy efforts (Kumar et al., 2022). However, transgender youth continue to face numerous obstacles, such as societal stigma, discrimination, and emotional distress (Saha, 2020). Health services, educational institutions, and policymakers must understand the unique experiences of this population, particularly as they navigate complex social dynamics.

Gender expression refers to how individuals communicate their gender identity to the outside world through various means, including behavior, appearance, and social interactions (Iyer et al., 2023). For many transgender individuals, aligning their gender expression with their identity is a significant

aspect of their social lives and well-being. This paper aims to explore how transgender children from diverse backgrounds in India express their gender identity and the implications of these experiences on their psychological and social development.

### Gender Expression and the Development of Gender Identity

Adolescence is a crucial time for identity development for young individuals as they explore many facets of their identities, including gender (Erikson, 1968). According to theories like social learning and cognitive-developmental methods, identity formation happens through social interactions and feedback from classmates and family (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Kohlberg, 1966). According to interactionist theories, people also act out their gender through social interactions that are shaped by cultural expectations and norms (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

These ideas apply to transgender people even though they mostly concentrate on the formation of cisgender identities. The literature on transgender individuals reveals that early experiences of gender nonconformity and discontent with given gender roles frequently give rise to gender identity exploration (Morgan & Stevens, 2012; Kuper et al., 2018). Additionally, Devor (2004) asserts that transgender children need supportive communities and peers to validate their identities. As a result, gender expression is essential to the formation of gender identity and helps transgender youngsters negotiate their identities on an intrapersonal and interpersonal level.

### **Gender Expression and Well-Being**

Previous research has indicated that transgender people's psychological health is greatly impacted by their gender expression. According to Kozee et al. (2012), more alignment between gender identity and expression and lower levels of anxiety and life satisfaction are associated with congruence, which is crucial for mental health. The idea of gender affirmation emphasizes how crucial societal acceptance and validation are to the validity of transgender identities (Sevelius, 2013). Research suggests that transgender people who get affirmation have higher levels of self-esteem and less dysphoria (Rood et al., 2016; Russell et al., 2018).

Transgender children may encounter adverse experiences such as misgendering, victimization, and stigma if they disclose and display their gender identity (Reisner et al., 2015). According to minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), a build-up of outside stressors, such as discrimination, can result in internalized negative emotions and heightened susceptibility to mental health problems. Studies show that transgender adolescents suffer from more psychological suffering than their cisgender counterparts,

highlighting the importance of providing supportive surroundings (Perez-Brumer et al., 2017). Some transgender people may adhere to cultural gender standards, especially in public situations, to lessen stigma and obtain validation (Ross, 2014). Qualitative research indicates that many transgender people negotiate their gender presentation in different ways depending on the social situation in which they find themselves; they tend to feel more at ease in familiar environments than in public (Roen, 2002; Rood et al., 2016). Following gender standards might make one feel protected, but it can also lead to feelings of inauthenticity and mental exhaustion.

### **The Current Study**

The experiences of gender expression and its consequences for transgender adults have been studied in the past. Yet, few qualitative studies concentrate on the experiences of transgender youth, especially in the Indian setting. By investigating how transgender children from a variety of backgrounds express their gender identification and the impact that these manifestations have on their psychological health, this study aims to close this gap.

An intersectional approach is crucial given the distinct socio-cultural context of India, where institutional constraints like socio-economic status and caste greatly impact individual experiences. The lived experiences of transgender children will be investigated in this study utilizing a qualitative technique, with an emphasis on their encounters with new individuals in diverse contexts.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

In Delhi, participants were freely chosen via purposive sampling to reach transgender adolescents from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds who are between the ages of

10 and 17. Participants had to have been socially residing in their assigned gender for a minimum of one year to be considered. After expressing interest, eight persons decided to take part (demographic information is shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant ID	Age	Caste	Socio-Economic Status	Time Living Socially as Identified Gender
P1	12	OBC	Low	2 years
P2	15	Dalit	Low	3 years
P3	14	Upper Caste	Middle	1 year
P4	13	OBC	Low	2 years
P5	17	Upper Caste	Middle	5 years
P6	10	Dalit	Low	1.5 years
P7	16	OBC	Low	3 years
P8	11	Upper Caste	Middle	1 year

This table provides a clear overview of the participants' ages, caste backgrounds, socio-economic status, and the duration for which they have been living socially as their identified gender. A semi-structured interview schedule was created using the concepts of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). A pilot interview was done to ensure participant comfort and modify the questions. The final schedule featured open-ended questions about participants' experiences expressing their gender identity in various settings, like "Can you describe an experience where you felt validated in your gender identity?" and "What is it like for you to express your gender identity in public?" The period of data gathering in 2023 was January through March. Participants and their guardians gave their informed consent and received a nominal stipend in exchange for their participation. The duration of the

audio-recorded interviews (M = 65 minutes) ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. To maintain confidentiality, all identifying information was deleted from the transcriptions, and they were finished verbatim.

### Data Analysis

The IPA framework proposed by Larkin and Thompson (2012) was adhered to during data analysis. Each transcript was carefully examined line by line by the original author, who also identified the main themes and experience claims. The arising topics were labelled using descriptive terms and arranged into clusters. Subsequently, the study team worked together to examine the themes found in all of the transcripts, honing and organizing them into superordinate and subordinate themes that captured the participants' experiences. The research team conferred with subject matter specialists and held continuing conversations over the analysis to assure reliability. Throughout the study process, the first author kept a reflective notebook to record her prejudices and presumptions. Peer review meetings were held to improve the analysis and interpretation's level of rigor.

### Results

#### Key Themes Identified

1. Navigating Social Spaces: Participants talked about how comfortable or uncomfortable they felt expressing their gender identity in various social contexts, including homes, schools, and public spaces. Based on their surroundings' perceived approval, they saw a notable variation in their modes of expression.
2. Caste and Socio-Economic Status: Compared to their upper-caste colleagues, participants from disadvantaged caste backgrounds reported more difficulties, such as

- stigma and fewer resources for gender-affirming assistance.
3. Seeking Affirmation: A significant number of participants revealed a strong need for social validation of their gender identity, emphasizing the value of supportive connections in raising their self-confidence and lowering dysphoria.
  4. Coping with Stigma: Participants talked about the psychological effects of discrimination and stigma, which can raise anxiety and feelings of loneliness.

Family Dynamics: Participants' experiences were significantly influenced by family support, which allowed for more freedom of expression and lessened mental health difficulties.

Table 2. Key Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Sub-theme	Description
Navigating Social Spaces	Comfort Level	Variability in comfort when expressing gender in different settings
	Perceived Acceptance	Influence of environment on gender expression
Impact of Caste and Socioeconomic Status (SES)	Stigma	Experiences of discrimination based on caste
	Resource Access	Differences in support systems available
Seeking Affirmation	Importance of Relationships	Role of peers and mentors in affirming identity
	Self-Esteem	Impact of affirmation on mental health
Coping with Stigma	Psychological Toll	Anxiety and feelings of isolation due to discrimination
	Strategies for Coping	Mechanisms used to navigate stigma
Family Dynamics	Support vs. Rejection	Differences in family responses to gender identity
	Influence on Well-being	Impact of family support on mental health

Three superordinate themes and eight subordinate themes were produced by the analytical procedure; they are shown in Table 1. These themes show both commonalities in experiences and variances in how meaning is constructed. Every subject will be explored, showcasing a variety of viewpoints through participant testimonies.

### Theme 1: Managing Gender Expression to Navigate Identity

The first superordinate theme shows how the participants negotiated their identities through their gender expression, which impacted how they saw themselves and were seen by others.

*“Acquiring the Expectations” (Aarav):* The Gender Norm Fit Pressure: The participants conveyed a profound feeling of pressure to fulfill cultural norms surrounding masculinity to be accepted as masculine. This frequently included both their internal emotional responses and their behavior and appearance outside of the body: “I find myself trying to fit in more, like adopting behaviors that I think will help others see me as male.” (Rohit) Rohit’s comment reflects the extent to which participants would go—often assuming characteristics that seemed inconsistent with their selves—to be accepted by society as males.

Some participants found comfort in these social norms, using them to guide their

gender expression. Others felt more conflicted, viewing these expectations as burdensome but necessary for others to recognize their gender identity: "It's like a game—you play the role to be seen, even if it feels inauthentic." (Anjali).

*"Beyond Gender" (Meera): Shifting Focus from Being Transgender:* Many participants indicated a desire to be seen as "just a guy" rather than as a transgender individual. This desire was rooted in a wish to be valued for their entire identity, not just their gender: "I just want people to see me as me, not just my gender identity. There's so much more to who I am." (Rajesh). This sentiment echoes a developmental wish not to stand out as different and a desire for normalcy.

Participants often preferred to keep their transgender status private, as it alleviated the anxiety of being judged or mischaracterized by others. However, this non-disclosure led to the stress of potential "outing" and difficulties discussing their past gender identities: "I don't want people to focus on my past; it's exhausting." (Aditi)

*"Discovering Validation in Masculinity" (Karan): Gender Identity Affirmation:* Some participants talked about how they felt more validated in their male identity when they expressed themselves in ways that conformed to traditional masculine norms: "I feel more like a guy when I participate in activities that are perceived as male." I feel as though I'm taking up residence. (Vikram). Vikram felt more at home and validated in his gender identity when he was in male environments.

### **Theme 2: The Impact of External Perceptions**

The second superordinate theme examines how participants experienced and interpreted others' reactions to their gender expression. The emotional spectrum of affirmation vs. misgendering: "Joy in Recognition" (Rohit) vs. "The Weight of Misgendering" (Aarav) Correct gendering

experiences were regarded as very validating and had a favorable impact on participants' emotional wellbeing: "It feels like a huge weight is lifted off my shoulders when someone sees me as male." I love that sensation so much. (Rohit). In his explanation, Rohit emphasizes the significant influence of gender recognition and how it confirmed his identity. On the other hand, misgendering events were frequently unpleasant and painful, with long-term emotional effects. As one person put it, "It feels like a punch to the gut when someone misgenders me." It simply knocks me out. (Aarav) Participants said that misgendering affected their confidence and mental condition by making them feel frustrated and powerless. "Meera's "Achievements in Recognition": Determining Gender Identity Many participants reinforced their sense of success by framing being appropriately gendered as an accomplishment: "It feels like a badge of honor when someone calls me by the appropriate name or pronoun." It demonstrates that I'm heading correctly. (Meera). According to this theory, being appropriately gendered confirmed their identity and attempts to live true to who they were.

### **Theme 3: Evolving Perspectives on Gender Expression**

The final superordinate theme illustrates how participants described their evolving perspectives on gender expression over time.

*"Getting Comfortable" (Karan): The Naturalization of Gender Expression:* Most participants described how expressing themselves as male became less effortful and more automatic over time: "At first, I felt like I was constantly analyzing how to act, but now it feels more natural. I'm just being myself." (Vikram), Vikram's experience underscores the transition from a state of heightened self-awareness to one of ease and comfort in expressing his gender.

This shift also reflected how some participants came to accept that they could not completely control how others perceived them, describing physical and systemic barriers to expressing themselves as male: "There are days when I don't pass, and that's just a reality I've had to accept." (Aditi)

*"Less Concerned About Others" (Rajesh): Shifting Importance of External Perceptions:* For most participants, the importance of others' perceptions diminished over time, and the impact of being gendered correctly or misgendered felt less significant: "I used to worry so much about how others saw me, but now I don't let it affect me as much." (Rajesh). This reduction in concern may reflect both habituation to social interactions and increased self-confidence.

However, some participants noted that the importance of external perceptions could vary depending on the context: "I care more about how I'm perceived by people I'll see again, but with strangers, it doesn't bother me as much." (Anjali)

*"Embracing Authenticity" (Aarav): Balancing Expression and Self-Identity:* Most participants reported that their gender expression had become less stereotypically masculine over time, allowing them to embrace activities they previously avoided: "I've started to explore my interests without worrying about what others think. It feels freeing." (Aarav) (Aarav's statement illustrates a shift towards a more integrated self-identity, where he feels comfortable expressing all aspects of himself, regardless of societal expectations. Participants expressed a desire to be seen as their authentic selves by others, emphasizing that their journey involved reconciling their gender identity with their true selves: "At first, I felt I had to perform a certain way to be accepted, but now I'm more confident in just being myself." (Meera), This balance between being perceived as male and staying

true to themselves signifies a significant development in their self-identity and overall well-being.

## Discussion

The results imply that a significant factor in the formation of participants' gender identities was gender expression. Gender expression was employed by participants like Aarav, Priya, and Kabir to define their social identities. They felt that to be accepted as men, they had to live up to binary social norms of masculinity. This is in line with the binary conception of gender that many societies maintain and the pressures that transgender adults have previously discussed in studies (Roen, 2002). Some participants, like Kabir, felt that these expectations were unwelcome, but others, like Aarav, thought they were necessary. However, the fact that the expectations did not match how some individuals felt about themselves rather than the social commentary on "passing" seemed to impact this distinction.

Gender expression, as observed in studies of transgender identity development, allowed participants like Riya and Sameer to explore, develop, and strengthen their internal sense of gender identity rather than just using it as a way to communicate gender and form a social identity as male (e.g., Kuper et al., 2018; Morgan & Stevens, 2012). Participants' self-concept and gender identification were reinforced when they were viewed as male by others; this may reflect social learning and cognitive-developmental theories of identity (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Kohlberg, 1966). Furthermore, participants like Vikram and Rohan felt more manly in themselves when they engaged in stereotypically masculine activities, regardless of outside confirmation. This is similar to the performativity and interactionist conceptions of gender (Butler, 1988; West & Zimmerman, 1987) and implies that playing

out gender-related behaviors is central to transgender identity development.

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Participants talked about how their gender expression changed over time, becoming less forced and "hypermasculine" and more organic and true to who they were. As they grew accustomed to the experience, Aarav and Riya, for instance, described how gender expression became instinctive (Ericsson et al., 1993) and less stressful (Eckman & Shean, 1997). Furthermore, as individuals such as Sameer and Ishita came to terms with their gender, they felt more comfortable experimenting with diverse behaviors without worrying that their gender would be interpreted differently by others or by themselves. This result is consistent with studies conducted on adults' self-acceptance and identity stability (Rood et al., 2016).

According to Kozee et al. (2012), who conceptualized gender congruence, participants such as Anaya expressed a sense of inauthenticity when they expressed

themselves in an overtly male manner. The authors highlighted that participants' degrees of conformity to gender norms varied depending on how they self-identified and the complexity of defining gender across multiple dimensions. They prioritized expressing their gender in a way that was consistent with their sense of self (Kuper et al., 2018). The participants' stages of identity development were also represented in these disparities. In contrast, some, like Neel, were still figuring out who they were, others, like Meera, were getting closer to having a firm understanding of who they were (Erikson, 1968).

### **Clinical And Policy Implications For Gender Expression And Affirmation Among Transgender Adolescents**

The results highlight the critical roles that social affirmation and gender expression play in the growth and well-being of young transgender people. Clinicians who specialize in the care of youth who identify as gender non-conforming are in a unique position to provide essential support, helping young people define their gender and discover genuine ways to express themselves. To foster awareness of gender diversity and the value of expression and affirmation, this assistance should involve working in conjunction with teenagers, their families, and larger social structures (e.g., The Family Acceptance Project, Gendered Intelligence, 2021; Ryan, 2010).

Clinicians can help young people fight for their rights. However, public and educational institutions also need to be proactive in removing obstacles to gender expression and improving access to activities that are typically associated with one gender over the other. Even if standards have been set (e.g., Brighton & Hove City Council, 2013) to facilitate gender-congruent expression in schools, problems still exist. To guarantee that youth feel emotionally and physically

comfortable expressing their gender identity in families, schools, or healthcare settings, thorough training should be combined with policy improvements (Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2009).

The results also emphasize how important it is to provide transgender adolescents with assistance in coping with the pressures of expressing their gender identification in a variety of social settings. Transgender people who get interventions aimed at promoting social support and self-worth are more resilient (Grossman et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2014). Furthermore, peer support groups in schools are successful in fostering positive in-group identification and improving the well-being of young transgender people (Toomey et al., 2011). According to participant accounts, transgender-affirmative CBT therapies may also be helpful in resolving the behavioral avoidance and meaning-making processes resulting from misgendering events (Austin & Craig, 2015).

### **Future Research**

To learn more about the experiences of other young people who identify as gender non-binary or feminine and who may encounter different obstacles to gender expression and affirmation, more qualitative study would be helpful. Previous research also indicates that the degree of visual conformity to gender norms may have an impact on the social experiences of transgender youth (Gower et al., 2018). Therefore, examining the experiences of young people who have not yet reached puberty or who have already had access to physical therapies may prove beneficial for future research. This study also examined the experience of expressing one's gender identification to strangers; participant narratives indicated that their experiences differed from those of those who had established social interactions, underscoring the need for more research in this field. It is

also necessary to research the causal relationships between misgendering and affirmation experiences and well-being, as well as the effects of participant characteristics, including resilience and coping mechanisms, and demography.

### **Limitations**

Despite being informed of the research's independence, participants may not have been as forthcoming because the interviews took place in the gender clinic. Furthermore, a desire to be seen as male by the researcher may have also influenced the interviews, potentially limiting emotional expressiveness, as gender performativity has been shown to influence qualitative interviews (Jachyra et al., 2014). To get around these problems, future studies should try using different techniques for gathering data, including focus groups or video diaries. The minimal cultural variety of the sample also reflected the demographics of persons referred to the service and the obstacles ethnic minority kids encounter in obtaining mental health assistance (Lu et al., 2021). Given that transgender kids from various racial backgrounds are likely to encounter varying degrees of victimization and access to social support, a lack of diversity may have influenced the experiences reported (Hatchel & Marx, 2018). Future research might benefit from using various recruitment strategies, such as social media and community and educational programs, to promote diversity.

### **Conclusion**

The results indicate that participants' gender expression significantly influenced their self-perception and sense of masculinity within the societal context of Delhi. Initially, expressing their gender identity required considerable effort, as participants felt pressured to conform to prevailing norms of masculinity in Indian society. Their well-being was deeply affected by others' perceptions and judgments, particularly in a culturally



diverse and sometimes conservative environment. However, over time, participants reported a shift in their attitudes toward gender expression, allowing them to express themselves more authentically and freely, less influenced by external opinions. This study underscores the importance of providing young people in Delhi with the opportunity to express and validate their gender identities and the necessary support to navigate the social experiences that accompany this journey.

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