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SERVICE LEARNING WITH A GENDER PERSPECTIVE: RECONNECTING SERVICE LEARNING WITH TRANSGENDER ISSUES

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ABSTRACT: One of the many strengths of service-learning is its emphasis on improving the lives of vulnerable populations. Service Learning community partners commonly serve people of color, people with disabilities, people who are poor, and older persons. However, very few service-learning projects involve partners serving the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) population. The study was conducted with the transgender community in Simhachalnagar, Kateru, Rajahmahendravaram, over four months, from November 2023 to March 2024. After visiting the 150 subjects in the transgender community in Rajahmundry, Andhra Pradesh, India. The authors and the service learning facilitator conducted interviews with the participants using a structured questionnaire. After observing everything, they discussed the success stories of transgender people and how their actions are improving their quality of life and contributing to society more broadly. The paucity of LGBT service-learning projects may result from any number of factors, not the least of which may be service-learning administrators and instructors simply not knowing how to find, engage, and serve the LGBT community. This entry seeks to remedy this knowledge gap and encourage partnerships with the local LGBT community by describing a community-based research project implemented in five stages: partnership, collaboration, set-up, implementation, and dissemination.

KEYWORDS: Service learning, LGBT community, stigma discrimination, community-based collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Embracing one's transgender identity is a tremendous act of courage in a world that refuses to acknowledge their very existence. Gender diversity has existed in all times and cultures. It is becoming increasingly common to find trans students in the classroom, but their situation has not yet been normalized in terms of equal treatment (Bragg et al., 2018). Gender is a multifactorial construct. According to Gender Spectrum (Kurt, 2017), an organization committed to gender sensitivity and inclusion, gender can be understood in three ways: biological gender (according to the sex assigned at birth); gender expression (the external representation); and gender identity (how the person feels, how they believe they are). Cisgender means that the sex-gender identity with which a person identifies coincides with the one assigned at birth (Real Academia Española, 2020). It is the opposite term to trans, which is understood as a person who does not identify with the sex-gender assigned at birth or simply differs from the sexual binarism (McBride, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

After visiting the 150 subjects in the transgender community, a team of 25 final-year B.A. and B.Com. students, Rajahmundry, and Azith Singh Nagar, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India at the time period of November 2023 to March 2024. The authors and the service learning facilitator conducted interviews with the participants using a structured questionnaire. After observing everything, they discussed the success stories of transgender

people and how their actions are improving their quality of life and contributing to society more broadly.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The subjects responded to and answered the questions in the above-mentioned questionnaire. The humiliation and pain experienced by transgender individuals, and indeed the broader LGBTQ+ community, at the hands of their blood relatives in public spaces like cinema halls, hospitals, temples, and churches, highlight a deeply ingrained societal prejudice that persists despite legal advancements. This rejection and public shaming often stem from a lack of understanding, deeply held traditional beliefs, and transphobia/homophobia. The impact of such experiences extends far beyond the immediate moment, contributing to severe psychological distress, social isolation, and a constant fear of discrimination.

In cinema halls, a seemingly innocuous public space for leisure, transgender individuals might face mocking stares, derogatory comments, or even outright harassment from family members who are embarrassed or unaccepting of their identity. This public display of disapproval can be incredibly isolating, transforming a simple outing into a traumatic experience. The desire to blend in or enjoy a moment of normalcy is often shattered by the visible discomfort or outright hostility from those who should offer support. This could have led a pervasive sense of shame and a reluctance to engage in public life, further marginalizing them.

Hospitals, which should be safe havens for care, often become sites of deep humiliation for transgender individuals. Family members might refuse to acknowledge their chosen name or gender, insist on using their birth name and gender, or openly express disgust to

medical staff. The vulnerability inherent in seeking medical attention is amplified by the fear of judgment and rejection, making it a terrifying ordeal rather than a healing one.

In a heartwarming display of community and strategic planning, a remarkable initiative unfolded for twenty transgender individuals under the guidance of a respected elder known simply as Amma. This matriarch, revered for her wisdom and unwavering dedication, undertook the monumental task of uniting their diverse financial contributions.

Every day, Amma meticulously collected all the money earned by these individuals, whether through begging, daily wage labor, or other forms of income. This collective pot, a testament to their hard work and trust in Amma, was then managed with foresight and love. Instead of merely distributing the funds for immediate consumption, Amma had a far grander vision for their future security and well-being.

With each person's earnings consolidated, Amma ensured that a significant portion was allocated to create fixed deposits in individual accounts. This strategic move provided a stable financial foundation, offering them a sense of long-term security that had often been elusive. Beyond monetary savings, Amma also pursued investments in gold, a traditional symbol of wealth and a reliable asset in India, further safeguarding their future against economic uncertainties.

Perhaps the most impactful aspect of Amma's plan was her commitment to helping them acquire their own homes. This was a profound step towards self-sufficiency and dignity, offering a permanent address and a sense of belonging that many in the transgender community are denied. Each person, understanding the profound benefit of Amma's guidance, listened and obeyed her directives without question, their collective faith in her vision paving the way for a more secure and dignified future. This initiative was not just about

money; it was about building a foundation of respect, independence, and hope for a community often marginalized and overlooked.

Aradhya's Story: The Journey from Vamsi to a Celebrated Makeup Artist

Vamsi was born into a life full of challenges. His mother passed away during his birth, leaving him in the care of his father and older sister. After some time, his father remarried. A year later, a storm shook their lives—the couple was diagnosed with HIV. At the time, his stepmother was pregnant. Fearing for the unborn child, they rushed for medical help. By the grace of God, with proper treatment, the child was born healthy and free of HIV. That moment brought hope into their struggling family.

Even as a young boy, Vamsi was different—and proud of it. He loved fashion, dancing, and modeling, often performing as a girl. His classmates would laugh at him, but he never stopped. His spirit was stronger than their judgment.

After 10th, he joined SRR College for Intermediate in Vijayawada. He was a bright student, but boys kept their distance. He had only girlfriends, and he never let the isolation break him. If anything, it made him stronger.

Vamsi had a deep interest in makeup. His sister was a makeup artist, and that gave him access to all the tools he needed to learn. He watched videos, practiced on his sister and dolls, and became better every day. His sister recognized his passion and supported him wholeheartedly. Along with makeup, he also became an excellent mehendi artist.

In the daytime, he worked as a makeup assistant. But at night, Aradhya—his true self—stood at toll gates, clapping like many other transgender women, not just for money, but for the right to exist as who she was. With the money she earned, she sent funds back home, wanting her family to live comfortably—even if she had to suffer in silence.

After six months, she returned home to Vijayawada and bravely revealed her truth to her father. He was shocked and refused to accept her. Her maternal aunt also turned away. But her sister and brother-in-law stood by her. They gave her a home and the freedom to live as Aradhya.

Today, Aradhya is a successful makeup and mehendi artist in Vijayawada, known for her skill, grace, and spirit. Her journey—from pain to pride, from Vamsi to Aradhya—is a testament to the power of self-belief and unconditional love.

Reflection by the author team

Service learning revolves around the integration of the head, heart, and hands, fostering holistic development among students. Through active engagement, students observed real-life challenges faced by marginalized communities, educated them about essential resources, and provided encouragement.

The insidious cycle of **deception, fraudulent** promises, and the trauma of being **tortured, indoctrinated, intimidated, and enslaved** defines a daily reality that no human being should ever endure. This relentless oppression, often fueled by the lure of **easy money** and **extra bonuses**, has led to the chilling **normalization** of suffering.

Yet, even in the face of such profound pain, the human spirit yearns for a transition **from pain to power**, tirelessly **rebuilding hope** and **affirming faith**. It's about **cherishing the power** of resilience and, above all, **staying alive**.

We must recognize that **they our compassion** is not merely a benevolent act but an imperative. Imagine a world where **students would act as voice of victims**, amplifying the stories of those who have been silenced, thereby actively **giving back** to a community in desperate need. This raises a critical question: **Can you find one way** to truly break the

culture of silence? No human deserves to go through what these transgender persons have endured. In our limited world, we have the profound capacity to **open our minds, hearts, and just encompass these people too.** Only by extending radical empathy and actively dismantling the systems that perpetuate such brutality can we begin to forge a path towards genuine healing and justice for all. By touching their hearts with words of support and reassurance—"We are here for you"—they instilled hope and confidence. Additionally, they informed people about various government schemes designed to help them lead a dignified life.

Research gaps

Greater consideration needs to be given to the ways in which the trans population are identified and sampled. Future research should address the problems associated with the fact that trans people are not always easily identifiable.

These issues will need to be addressed when deciding how to incorporate all trans people, or as many as possible, within the context of particular pieces of research.

CONCLUSION

This importance isn't just a societal construct; it's deeply rooted in the universal spiritual principle that in God's vision, all human beings are equal. Every life is a precious gift, and no one should feel compelled to prematurely end their journey due to the crushing weight of societal stigma. By extending a hand of genuine support and demonstrating their inherent worth, we actively counter the very forces that marginalize and devalue lives, thereby fostering an environment where every individual feels cherished, respected, and empowered to live their life to its fullest potential. The authors told these persons not to

become upset when difficulty came their way. They **laughed** in its face and **knew** that they **were** in the hands of God.

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FIGURES AND TABLES





Questionnaire on Demographic Information:

1. Which gender identity best describes you?
2. What is your age range?
3. Have you experienced discrimination (e.g., in employment, housing, public spaces) due to your gender identity in the past year?
4. What are some of the biggest challenges you face as a transgender individual in your daily life? (Open-ended, allow brief answer)
5. Do you have easily accessible affirming healthcare services (e.g., general practitioner, mental health professional) in your area?
6. Have you experienced barriers to accessing healthcare due to your gender identity?
7. How would you rate your overall mental well-being in the past month?
8. Do you have access to mental health support that understands and affirms transgender experiences?