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Sexual minorities in the face of the COVID-19 storm

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13-05-2021

Already marginalized, LGBT + communities have been particularly affected by the pandemic. A study conducted in India, Canada and Thailand aims to better take into account their reality in the response to this health crisis, and those to come.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Vidya Sagar lived only for lavani, a traditional dance in Maharashtra state. With the income from her benefits across India, the 39-year-old transgender woman was able to support the 11 members of her extended biological family, of which she is the main financial supporter.

A year later, she is still dancing, but without an audience, alone in front of her mirror wearing makeup and dressing to go to a motorway toll booth where she now collects handouts from motorists in exchange for a prayer. favorable.

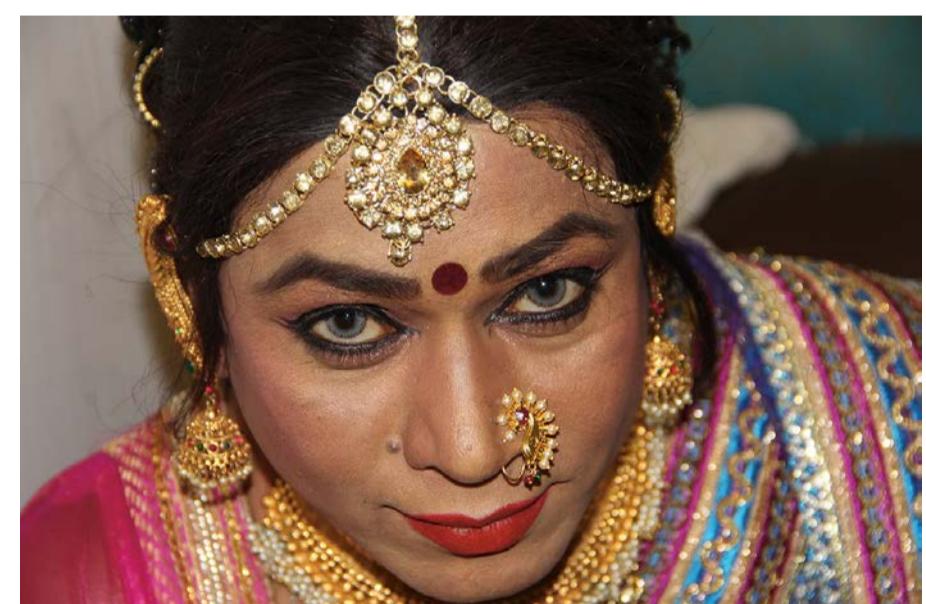
"The first day I went there, in October, the sun was beating very hard. We had to wear a mask and people were afraid of us. When we knocked on windows, we were ignored. I cried that day. But I didn't let myself be put down," says Vidya Sagar, who receives us in her cramped room in a slum in Ulhasnagar, on the outskirts of Mumbai.

Despite her determination, she now only earns half the income she received before the pandemic. And above all, he misses the stage a lot. "When I danced I was relaxed. Now I'm still stressed," says the one who spent the first months of confinement organizing the daily distribution of food rations for the 250 or so transgender people in Ulhasnagar and other underprivileged people.

The precarious situation in which the pandemic has left Vidya Sagar is far from unique in her community. Almost all of the approximately two million transgender women in the country indeed derive their income from informal activities requiring contact with the public. You should know that the members of this community, often called *hijras*- a term that some of them consider pejorative, but which is still widely in use - have a paradoxical status in India: for millennia, they have been attributed mystical powers of blessing while maintaining superstitious fears towards them. They thus find themselves confined to a handful of trades: soliciting alms in public places, blessing newborns, newlyweds and new businesses, but also sex work.

Seek by helping

How to better support the various sexual minorities around the world in their particular challenges in the context of a pandemic? This is the question asked by Peter Newman, professor in the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto. When the world closed in on itself in March 2020, he was in Asia to meet with his research partners as part of a large study on the inclusion of LGBT + communities in India and Thailand. A year later, he is still in Bangkok, but his plans are not the same. "We have changed our plans to respond to the inclusion challenges that were right there in front of our eyes at the heart of this pandemic," he explains.



Vidya Sagar is preparing to take the stage briefly for a Lavani dance number at a Mumbai transgender community awards ceremony in March 2021. Image: Zoya Thomas Lobo

This is how he and his partners envisioned a peer counselor intervention that would not only document the personal experiences of people like Vidya Sagar, but also help them minimize the risk of HIV infection. SARS-CoV-2 and the impact of the pandemic on their mental health and socioeconomic status in India, Thailand and Canada. In each of these countries, 100 trans, 100 men who have sex with men and 100 women who have sex with women will be interviewed. "We don't just want to collect data without causing harm. We do community-driven work, says Peter Newman. The idea is also to be able to say "Oh, you are running out of food and medicine "and guide participants to the appropriate resources."

This approach, known as motivational interviewing, is "client-centered" and "based on non-judgmental listening". "We want to make people feel that we understand them," continues Peter Newman. The researchers take into account the fact that LGBT + communities maintain a mistrust of the institutions supposed to help them, such as the health system or the police, which have often contributed and which continue to contribute to their marginalization.

The motivational interviewing approach has already proven its worth in the past, argues Peter Newman, especially with drug users. "You don't tell people to stop doing [bad] behavior. The question is rather to know what they (designates people without distinction of gender) could do, considering their situation, to reduce the risks run. We want to bring them to a lower level of risk. For sex workers, this means directing them to resources - such as food banks or housing assistance programs - that will allow them to stop relying on sex work to meet their needs. base, illustrates the researcher.

The pandemic context, however, brings an additional challenge in the conduct of such a study: because of the health measures, the three motivational interviews with each and each of the 900 volunteers must be conducted in a completely virtual way, through applications of videoconferencing. However, not all of them have access to these technologies or even do not have the digital skills necessary to use them. The exchanges are all the more complicated. This is not to mention the loss of human contact which, in itself, can weaken exchanges. Peter Newman nonetheless sees in these tools a great potential for the future of community interventions. "The advantage is that you can reach a large part of the population without increasing the risk [of infection]. "Even in non-pandemic times, telemedicine interventions make it easier to reach people who are socially or geographically isolated. The fact that counselors also identify themselves as belonging to a sexual minority also helps to build a climate of trust despite the distance, says the professor.



Trans women line up outside a church in Mumbai in October 2020 to receive food rations from an NGO. Image: Zoya Thomas Lobo

Collateral damages

However, there were delays in the planned timetable for carrying out the study. And ironically, it's the pandemic itself that is to blame. In all three countries, approval processes by institutional ethics committees have been slowed down.

At the beginning of March 2021, when we visit the offices of the Humsafar Trust, the body which is mandated to lead the Indian part of the study and which has been working with the LGBT + population for more than a quarter of a century in Mumbai, the green light for recruiting volunteers has still not been obtained. But the workers of the Humsafar Trust already know too well the deleterious effects of the pandemic on their customers.

Raj Kanjiya, trans man and collaborator of the organization, recounts the many calls he has received during the night in recent months. At the end of the line, there were people on the verge of suicide because the confinement had forced them to return to live with their family, who had no idea of their sexual identity. "They were told, 'Now dress and behave like a woman. We are going to marry you. '"

Shruta Rawat, research fellow at the Humsafar Trust, adds that many people in the process of transition have come up against the fact that hormonal treatments were not considered essential medication. "To survive, some had to spend the money they saved for their gender reassignment surgery," she says.

The pandemic has also significantly disrupted access to HIV testing and antiretroviral treatment, notes Shruta Rawat. A problem corroborated by dancer Vidya Sagar, whose HIV-positive trans friend died at the end of January 2021, after experiencing difficulties in the supply of drugs, linked to containment measures.

As for state aid, it rarely made it to the right place because of bureaucratic rigidity. In the case of trans women for example, even if they have been recognized as a "third sex" in India since 2014, very few have the papers associated with their new gender identity. "Of the 23,000 people we have helped across the country, we were only able to link 83 to a government aid program that gave them a one-time sum of 1,500 rupees [the equivalent of \$ 26]", explains Shruta Rawat.

Urmi Jadav, a 20-year Humsafar Trust employee and peer counselor to trans women for the study, notes that people who had never used sex work for a living are recently engaging in this type of activity. .

As for those who already practiced this profession, they found themselves in an even more precarious situation. This is the case of S., 35, whom we meet at her home, as she prepares to go to work.

After months of surviving on rations provided by a non-governmental organization (NGO), she began again, towards the end of 2020, to travel on an unused railway track of the Mumbai commuter train network. , at nightfall, to wait for customers. "Before containment, the pricing system was different. Today people have no more money. If we could ask them 200 or 500 rupees for a sexual service, now we sometimes have to return it for 100 rupees, "says S. Fortunately, she was able to count on the understanding of her owner, who agreed to accumulate without interest on late rent during the pandemic.

Unlike Vidya Sagar, skeptical of the real virulence of COVID-19, S. ensures that health measures are followed to the letter, even with his clients. In addition to a condom, she now requires them to wear a mask and disinfect their hands with a hydroalcoholic gel, as advised by an NGO committed to trans women.

Skepticism towards the pandemic and the propensity to respect health guidelines within LGBT + communities are two issues that the study seeks to measure.



Vidya Sagar in the portico of her cramped room in a slum in Ulhasnagar, a suburb of Mumbai. Image: Zoya Thomas Lobo

Beyond fear

Among all the problems listed, one big absence remains: COVID-19 itself. While several community members and Humsafar Trust staff have contracted it, the health issues that have arisen among LGBT + people, without minimizing them, do not outweigh the side effects caused by the measures taken to contain the disease. pandemic.

Shruti Rawat also believes that governments' strategy of betting on fear and coercion to enforce health measures has exacerbated the problems of communities. An observation shared by Notisha Massaquoi, the postdoctoral fellow from the University of Toronto who is overseeing the Canadian part of the study. In addition, "our work around HIV over the past decades has shown that the fear-based approach does not work [to change behavior]".

She notes that in Canada, too, the strategies used by the authorities have not been equally effective for everyone. "In Toronto, 83% of people infected with the coronavirus were people of color [even though they represent half of the population]," said Notisha Massaquoi, citing data released by the City in July 2020. As for sexual minorities and other marginalized communities, factors such as employment, transportation and housing increase their risk of exposure to the virus.

Notisha Massaquoi believes that the research results will highlight the “intersectionality” (or overlap) of discrimination based on ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity. "A whole segment of the population in Canada does not enjoy the privileges" generally associated with rich countries compared to countries like India and Thailand, she assures us.

Peter Newman considers that the study will, in the long term, enable community organizations in the three countries to “develop their capacities for action with marginalized people” in times of crisis. He also hopes governments will pay attention to research findings and pandemic experiences specific to LGBT +. “Before the next crisis strikes, we must already ask ourselves how to prevent all [health] measures from taking into account only the reality of straight couples with 2.4 children. ”



The pandemic has forced several trans women to find alternative livelihoods. Due to a lack of clients, some sex workers (like this one, anonymous) had to turn to begging at traffic lights. Image: Zoya Thomas Lobo

Zoya, photojournalist

For Zoya Thomas Lobo, the COVID-19 pandemic has been both a hardship and a stepping stone. As with many transgender women, the 10-month interruption of Mumbai's suburban train service cut her off from her main livelihood, that of collecting alms from female users. But the pandemic also gave him a new one.



Image: Zoya Thomas Lobo

In mid-April 2020, when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a first extension of the confinement, she was the only photographer in Mumbai to capture the spontaneous and quickly dispersed demonstration by the police of thousands of migrant workers demanding trains. specials to return to their

villages. After a year and a half of trying to find her place in the journalistic world, she held her first exclusive, sold her first freelance, in addition to being recognized by her colleagues as "the first transgender photojournalist of Mumbai and Maharashtra". As a heterosexual cisgender, the author of this report wanted to work with Zoya Thomas Lobo so that she adds an insider perspective, intimate and informed, on the issues facing her community.

While she continues to walk the trains to meet her needs while dreaming of a stable job in an Indian news media, Zoya Thomas Lobo signs her first major photo report in *Quebec Science*.

The research project described in this article and the production of this feature were made possible through support from the International Development Research Center of Canada (IDRC) .

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