Invisible Struggles: Socio-Economic Challenges of Transmen in Kerala – A Qualitative Study.

Ms. Jayalakshmi L

Research Scholar, Sociology, Institute of Management in Government, Trivandrum

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the socio-economic challenges faced by transmen in Kerala, India, highlighting their experiences of marginalization, exclusion, and resilience. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study reveals the complex interplay of identity-based discrimination, structural violence, and institutional neglect. The findings underscore the need for inclusive policies and interventions that address the specific needs of transmen, promoting a more nuanced understanding of gender diversity and social justice in contemporary Kerala.

Keywords: Transmen, Kerala, socio-economic challenges, marginalization, intersectionality, qualitative study, gender diversity, social justice, policy invisibility, resilience

Introduction

Transmen in Kerala encounter persistent and multifaceted socio-economic challenges that often remain unrecognized within mainstream discourses on gender and development. These challenges include restricted access to education, widespread employment discrimination, inadequate healthcare, and limited familial and institutional support. Despite Kerala's reputation for progressive gender policies and high human development indicators, transmen remain one of the most marginalized and invisible segments within the broader transgender community.

In India, while legal advancements such as the landmark NALSA judgment (2014) have acknowledged the rights of transgender individuals, public attention and policy interventions have predominantly focused on transfeminine identities. This has resulted in the systemic neglect of transmasculine experiences and needs. Transmen—individuals assigned female at birth but who identify and live as men—are often left at the periphery of both policy frameworks and social movements, rendering their lived realities largely undocumented and misunderstood.

Kerala stands out in the Indian context for being the first state to introduce a comprehensive Transgender Policy in 2015. However, even within such progressive frameworks, there is a tendency to homogenize the transgender community, thereby eclipsing the specific struggles of transmen. Most state initiatives, welfare schemes, and public narratives continue to prioritize the concerns of transwomen, inadvertently marginalizing transmasculine voices.

The socio-economic location of transmen in Kerala is shaped by the complex interplay of gender, caste, class, religion, and geography. These intersecting identities influence their access to essential resources such as education, employment, healthcare, housing, and legal recognition. Many transmen face overt discrimination in the workplace, are forced into precarious employment, or compelled to conceal their

identities due to fear of societal backlash. Others experience alienation within their own families and communities, leading to emotional and economic precarity.

This qualitative study seeks to address the significant knowledge gap by centering the lived experiences of transmen in Kerala. Through in-depth narratives and ethnographic engagement, the study explores how structural inequalities, social stigma, and institutional neglect collectively shape their socio-economic realities. By doing so, it challenges the invisibility of transmen in both policy and public discourse and aims to contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of gender diversity and social justice in contemporary Kerala.

Theoretical Framework

1. Intersectionality as a Framework of Analysis

The concept of intersectionality, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), was developed to analyze how race and gender intersect in the lives of African-American women. Over time, it has evolved into a broader analytical tool used to understand how various axes of identity and power—including caste, class, religion, sexuality, and disability—interact to create unique and layered experiences of marginalization.

In the Indian context, where caste hierarchies, religious diversity, and socio-economic inequalities are deeply entrenched, intersectionality is particularly relevant. For transmen in Kerala, identity is not defined by gender alone, but is also influenced by:

- Caste (e.g., Dalit transmen experience compounded marginalization),
- Class (access to education and employment opportunities),
- Religion (stigma and exclusion within religious institutions),
- Geography (urban vs. rural differences), and
- Language and culture (e.g., Malayalam-speaking regional dynamics).

Applying an intersectional lens allows the study to challenge homogenized representations of "transgender people" and instead foreground the specific and often invisible struggles of transmen, which are frequently overshadowed by the dominant narratives centered on transwomen or hijra communities.

2. Conceptualizing Transgender Identities

The term transgender is commonly used to describe individuals whose gender identity does not align with the sex assigned to them at birth. However, this term is not universally understood in the same way. The conceptualization of transgender identities varies significantly between Western academic frameworks and non-Western, culturally embedded understandings.

a. Western vs. Non-Western Frameworks

Western theoretical discourses often explore transgender identity through:

- Gender performativity (Judith Butler),
- Medical transition narratives, and
- Queer theory, which challenges the binary model of gender.

In contrast, South Asian societies have long recognized non-binary gender expressions—such as hijras, aravanis, and jogappas—but these categories do not encompass the identities or experiences of transmen. In Kerala, the cultural and linguistic lack of recognition for transmasculine identities often results in their misidentification as "tomboys" or lesbians, further compounding their invisibility.

b. Erasure and Hypervisibility

Transmen often navigate a paradox of erasure and hypervisibility. On one hand, they are largely invisible

within LGBTQIA+ discourses, health policies, and media representations. On the other, they become hypervisible within their immediate communities, where gender non-conformity is closely monitored and often punished. This dual reality creates significant socio-economic barriers, including:

- Misgendering and denial of correct identity documents,
- Exclusion from transgender welfare schemes,
- Employment discrimination based on gender expression.

3. Institutional Structures and Structural Violence

This study also draws on the concept of structural violence, as theorized by Johan Galtung, to understand how systemic structures harm or marginalize individuals. For transmen in Kerala, institutional and bureaucratic systems often perpetuate exclusion in subtle yet pervasive ways, including:

4. Embodiment and the Politics of Medicalization

Embodiment—how individuals experience and express their gender through their bodies—is crucial to understanding transmen's realities. In Kerala, access to gender-affirmative care (e.g., hormone therapy, surgeries) is often limited, expensive, and pathologized. This creates a significant gap between gender identity and physical expression, resulting in emotional distress and social dysphoria.

Additionally, the medicalization of transgender identities, particularly as a prerequisite for legal gender recognition, reinforces binary and essentialist notions of gender. Scholars such as Dean Spade and Susan Stryker have critiqued this medicalized and colonial framework, advocating instead for self-determined, decolonial approaches to gender identity.

5. Relevance of Intersectionality to This Study

- Employing an intersectional approach enables the study to:
- Map the multiple layers of marginalization faced by transmen,
- Examine how intersecting identities—gender, caste, class, religion—shape their socio-economic realities,
- Critique the dominance of transwomen-centric narratives in policy and activism,
- Recommend inclusive and differentiated policy reforms that address the specific needs of transmen.

By integrating theories of intersectionality, gender identity, embodiment, and structural violence, this study offers a nuanced and critical lens through which to explore the socio-economic struggles of transmen in Kerala. It seeks not only to document these challenges but to amplify the voices of a marginalized group often left out of both scholarly inquiry and policy design.

Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative research methodology**, which is best suited to capturing the **subjective, lived experiences** of individuals whose voices are often marginalized within dominant socio-political discourses. Focusing on transmen in Kerala—a group significantly underrepresented in academic, policy, and media narratives—demands a research approach that is **empathetic, flexible, and reflexive**. Qualitative methods facilitate in-depth exploration of the complex socio-economic challenges faced by transmen in their everyday lives.

Research Design

The study employs an **exploratory, descriptive qualitative design**, grounded in **intersectional and feminist epistemologies**. This design is appropriate as it:

- Enables a nuanced understanding of identity-based experiences,
- Prioritizes participants' voices as central sources of knowledge, and
- Embraces contextual realities over universal generalizations.

Rather than aiming for generalizability, the study seeks to provide **rich, context-specific insights** into the socio-economic struggles of transmen in Kerala.

Research Objectives

The methodology is aligned with the following objectives:

1. To explore the lived socio-economic experiences of transmen in Kerala,
2. To understand the forms of discrimination and exclusion they face in education, employment, healthcare, and welfare,
3. To analyze how intersectional factors—such as gender identity, caste, class, and religion—shape their life trajectories and opportunities.

Research Setting: Kerala

Kerala presents a unique research setting with its high human development indicators and reputation for gender-inclusive policies, including the pioneering **Kerala Transgender Policy (2015)**. However, despite such progressive initiatives, transmen remain largely **invisible in public spaces, institutional policies, and community discourses**. The study is conducted in **urban and semi-urban districts** where awareness of transgender issues exists, yet support systems remain uneven and fragmented.

Sampling Strategy

The study employs **purposive sampling**, selecting participants based on their self-identified gender identity as transmen and relevance to the research questions. To further expand the participant pool and reach less-visible networks, **snowball sampling** is used—where participants refer others within their community.

Sample Size:

A total of **15–20 participants** are targeted, with data collection continuing until **thematic saturation** is achieved—that is, until no new themes emerge from the interviews.

Inclusion Criteria:

Participants must:

- Self-identify as transmen,
- Be 18 years of age or older,
- Have resided in Kerala for at least 3 years,
- Be willing to provide informed consent and participate voluntarily.

Data Collection Methods

Primary Tool: Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

- Interviews follow a flexible guide to ensure consistency while allowing participants to share personal narratives in their own terms.
- Conducted in Malayalam or English, based on participant preference.
- Each interview lasts approximately **60–90 minutes** and is **audio-recorded with consent**.

Key Interview Themes:

- Gender identity formation and family dynamics,
- Educational access, dropout, and discrimination,
- Employment challenges and workplace exclusion,
- Housing, healthcare, and legal recognition,
- Experiences with government welfare and transgender policies,
- Mental health, resilience, and community belonging.

Field Notes and Observations:

Detailed field notes are maintained to record **non-verbal cues**, **social contexts**, and **researcher reflections** during and after interviews.

Data Analysis

The data is analyzed using **Thematic Analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involves the following steps:

1. **Familiarization** – Transcribing and immersing in the data,
2. **Generating Codes** – Identifying significant statements, experiences, and patterns,
3. **Constructing Themes** – Grouping codes into broader thematic categories (e.g., "healthcare neglect," "policy invisibility," "economic precarity"),
4. **Reviewing Themes** – Ensuring internal coherence and accurate representation of participant voices,
5. **Defining and Naming Themes** – Refining themes for analytical clarity,
6. **Writing Up** – Presenting findings with interpretive analysis and **illustrative quotes**.

Qualitative data analysis software such as **NVivo** or **Atlas.ti** may be used to organize and manage textual data efficiently.

Ethical Considerations

Given the vulnerability of the transmen population, the study adheres to strict ethical guidelines:

- **Informed Consent:** Participants are provided with detailed information and consent forms in their preferred language.
- **Confidentiality:** Pseudonyms are used, and all personal identifiers are removed to ensure anonymity.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Participants are informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.
- **Emotional Wellbeing:** Referrals to mental health professionals are provided if interviews evoke distress.
- **Ethical Clearance:** The research protocol has been reviewed and approved by a recognized **Institutional Ethics Review Committee**.

Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher acknowledges their own **positionality**—including social location, privileges, and biases—and the potential influence these may have on the research process. A **reflexive journal** is maintained throughout the fieldwork to critically reflect on:

- Assumptions and expectations,
- Power dynamics between researcher and participants,
- Emotional responses and ethical dilemmas encountered.

This commitment to reflexivity enhances the **transparency, accountability, and ethical rigor** of the research, in line with feminist and decolonial methodologies.

Limitations of the Methodology

While the study provides rich qualitative insights, it is important to note its limitations:

- **Limited generalizability** due to small, non-random sample,
- **Recruitment challenges** arising from stigma and the lack of visible transmasculine networks,
- **Linguistic and cultural constraints** in articulating nuanced gender experiences.

Despite these limitations, the study offers **critical, grounded perspectives** that can inform more inclusive policy-making and enrich the academic understanding of transgender lives in India.

Findings

The thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with transmen in Kerala revealed a complex interplay of socio-economic exclusion, identity-based discrimination, and strategic resilience. While participants' experiences were shaped by unique personal trajectories, several **core themes** consistently emerged across narratives. These findings are presented thematically, integrating participant quotes to preserve the **authenticity and subjectivity** of lived experiences.

1. Navigating Educational Spaces: Barriers and Resilience

Structural Exclusion in Schooling

Participants described their school years as periods of emotional distress and alienation. Assigned female at birth, they were compelled to adhere to gendered norms such as wearing skirts, using female-designated restrooms, and engaging in gender-binary classroom structures. Many recalled facing ridicule, bullying, and a lack of institutional support.

"I hated going to school in a skirt. I felt like I was in a costume... but if I resisted, I was scolded or sent home." — *Participant X, 24*

Teachers often lacked gender sensitivity and reinforced stereotypes, sometimes dismissing participants' distress as behavioral issues or confusion.

Caste and Class-Based Barriers

The intersection of caste and class further compounded educational exclusion. Transmen from Dalit, Adivasi, or economically marginalized backgrounds lacked access to private education or psychological support systems, making dropout more likely.

"My classmates teased me for not being 'girly' enough. When I told my teacher, she said I was confused because we are poor." — *Participant Y, 20*

Resilience Through Alternative Education

Despite early disruptions, several transmen resumed education through open schooling, NGO-run learning centers, or distance education. Education emerged as a vital tool for gaining independence and improving

employability.

"I passed 12th via distance mode. That certificate helped me get a job—even if it was just basic work." — *Participant M, 29*

2. Employment and Economic Marginalization

Precarious Work and Informality

Most participants were engaged in informal work—such as driving auto-rickshaws, tailoring, or salon work—often cycling through multiple jobs due to workplace discrimination, lack of documentation, or misgendering.

"When I got selected at a textile unit, they asked me to bring a female ID proof. When I said I'm a transman, they rejected me." — *Participant C, 27*

Gender Identity and Workplace Exclusion

Participants whose gender expression was masculine—due to hormone therapy or physical appearance—still faced structural exclusion when official documents failed to align with their gender identity. Instances of misgendering, bathroom denial, and invasive questions were common.

"They made jokes about my voice. I was told to 'choose a side' — either come as a girl or don't come at all." — *Participant F, 31*

Entrepreneurship and Community-Based Work

Some transmen turned to entrepreneurship, establishing small businesses with limited support from NGOs or queer collectives. However, access to formal capital or bank loans remained largely inaccessible.

"I took a small loan through a friend. No bank would approve anything under my name as a transman." — *Participant H, 26*

3. Healthcare Access and Gender-Affirming Services

Discrimination in General Healthcare

Participants reported widespread discrimination in healthcare settings, including misgendering, curiosity-driven questioning, and denial of routine services. Few doctors demonstrated awareness of transgender health needs.

"When I went for a fever, the doctor asked unnecessary questions about my chest and periods. It was humiliating." — *Participant G, 23*

Barriers to Gender-Affirming Care

Access to hormone therapy and gender-affirming surgeries was severely limited. Most had to travel outside Kerala and pay out-of-pocket for private services, with added burdens of parental consent—even in adulthood.

"For testosterone, I had to go to Chennai. Even there, they asked me to bring my parents. I'm 28 years old!" — *Participant A, 28*

Policy Gaps and Misrecognition

While Kerala's Transgender Policy (2015) exists, participants felt it was poorly implemented and skewed toward transwomen. Forms often lacked appropriate gender options, and officials showed limited understanding of transmasculine identities.

"The forms don't even have 'transman' as an option. If I select 'transgender,' they assume I'm a hijra or transwoman." — *Participant S, 22*

4. Family Dynamics and Social Support

Initial Rejection and Familial Violence

Nearly all participants faced rejection, abuse, or coercion upon expressing their gender identity. In conser-

vative households, gender non-conformity was medicalized, spiritualized, or silenced through forced institutionalization or arranged marriages.

"My father said I was possessed. He took me to a temple for exorcism." — *Participant W, 25*

Conditional or Delayed Acceptance

Some families came to accept participants over time—often triggered by their financial contributions or public affirmation—but this acceptance remained conditional, private, or tied to maintaining social respectability.

"My mother accepts me but calls me by my old name when relatives visit. I don't blame her; she's scared." — *Participant D, 30*

Chosen Families and Queer Networks

Due to rejection from biological families, many participants formed "chosen families" within queer and transgender networks. These communities offered emotional support, housing, and practical assistance in times of crisis.

"I have no biological family now. But my friends are my brothers. We look out for each other." — *Participant Z, 24*

The data reveal a **multi-layered architecture of systemic exclusion**—with transmen facing compounded marginalization in education, employment, healthcare, and familial spaces. These barriers are further shaped by caste, class, and regional disparities. Yet, within these constraints, participants actively employed **resilience strategies**: from alternative education and entrepreneurship to solidarity within queer networks. Their narratives reflect not only precarity but also **agency, creativity, and resistance** in the face of a cis-normative and binary social order.

Discussion

Unpacking Socio-Economic Challenges: A Thematic Analysis of Structural Barriers

Using a qualitative methodology involving in-depth semi-structured interviews and thematic coding through qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo), this study identified key themes that illuminate the socio-economic struggles of transmen in Kerala. The coding process highlighted intersecting challenges shaped by gender norms, institutional neglect, and socio-cultural stigma.

Theme 1: Educational Exclusion and Institutional Erasure

Thematic analysis revealed that educational spaces function as early sites of exclusion. Participants frequently reported misgendering, rigid dress codes, lack of gender-neutral facilities, and emotional harassment from peers and teachers. These issues led to school dropouts or prolonged absenteeism. The absence of gender-sensitive pedagogy and administrative policies reinforces structural barriers, as captured in codes such as *"gender non-conformity punishment"* and *"institutional silence."*

Theme 2: Employment Precarity and Structural Transphobia

Employment-related codes such as *"job rejection due to gender presentation," "ID mismatch,"* and *"informal labor reliance"* indicate the systemic challenges transmen face in the labor market. Many participants reported being excluded from formal employment due to incongruent identity documents or discrimination based on appearance. The lack of workplace inclusion policies and employer awareness contributes to job insecurity and economic vulnerability.

Theme 3: Inaccessible and Non-Affirming Healthcare Systems

A recurring concern across interviews was the lack of access to gender-affirming healthcare. Codes such as *"medical ignorance," "surgical inaccessibility,"* and *"mental health neglect"* underscore a healthcare

system ill-equipped to serve transmen. Participants spoke of misdiagnosis, lack of understanding among health professionals, and the financial burden of hormone therapy or chest reconstruction surgeries.

Theme 4: Family Alienation and the Emergence of Chosen Kinship

The analysis surfaced strong narratives around familial rejection. The codes *"emotional disownment,"* *"conditional acceptance,"* and *"violence within families"* reflect the trauma of navigating heteronormative family structures. In contrast, codes like *"peer solidarity"* and *"chosen family support"* reveal the critical role of community networks in survival and identity affirmation.

Theme 5: Bureaucratic Invisibility and Legal Roadblocks

Participants described significant difficulties in legally changing gender markers and accessing welfare schemes. The coding categories *"policy ambiguity,"* *"documentation hurdles,"* and *"legal gatekeeping"* show how bureaucratic structures perpetuate exclusion. Despite Kerala's Transgender Policy (2015), implementation gaps remain wide, particularly in recognizing transmasculine identities.

Situating Findings in Global and Regional Contexts

Findings from this study align with research from the Global South that emphasizes the systemic invisibility of transmasculine individuals within both queer movements and mainstream society. Unlike contexts in the Global North—where gender-affirming services and legal recognition may be more accessible—transmen in Kerala continue to face bureaucratic and socio-cultural obstacles that reproduce marginalization.

While international studies (e.g., in Canada and the UK) show better healthcare access, racial, class, and citizenship-based inequalities persist. In contrast, Kerala's transmen must navigate both formal exclusion and informal stigmatization, compounded by caste and class. The study also highlights the persistent academic and policy gap wherein transwomen's issues are more visible, reinforcing the urgency to center transmasculine narratives.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Towards Context-Sensitive and Transmasculine-Inclusive Policies

Based on the empirical themes derived from qualitative data, the following targeted interventions are recommended:

1. **Education**
- Introduce gender-neutral infrastructure and curricula that reflect diverse gender identities.
- Institutionalize training modules for teachers and school counselors on gender diversity.
- Establish support cells within educational institutions for gender-nonconforming students.

2. **Employment**
- Create affirmative action and skill-development programs specifically for transmen.
- Sensitize HR personnel and implement trans-inclusive hiring practices across public and private sectors.
- Develop mechanisms to ensure smooth updating of identity documents for employment purposes.

3. **Healthcare**
- Provide free or subsidized gender-affirming services (hormone therapy, surgeries, counseling) through public healthcare.
- Develop trans-competency training programs for medical professionals.
- Set up dedicated gender clinics that cater to both transmen and transwomen with equal attention.

4. Social Protection and Legal Support

- Extend state welfare schemes to include transmen explicitly.
- Simplify and de-stigmatize the legal gender change process.
- Ensure inclusion of transmen in housing, livelihood, and social security programs.

Strengthening Support Systems: Family, Community, and Institutions

Beyond policy, social transformation is necessary:

- **Family Support**: Launch community-based family counseling programs to address rejection and violence at home.
- **Community Spaces**: Fund and promote trans-led community centers offering legal aid, healthcare referrals, and peer support.
- **Institutional Accountability**: Embed trans-inclusivity as a criterion in institutional audits for education, healthcare, and public service agencies.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Reflections on Methodology

While the qualitative methodology provided nuanced insights, certain limitations exist:

- **Sample Size**: The participant pool, though rich in diversity, was relatively small. Larger, more representative samples would enhance generalizability.
- **Scope**: The research focused predominantly on urban and semi-urban areas, potentially missing rural-specific challenges.

Suggested Future Research

- **Intersectional Studies**: Future research should explore the unique challenges faced by Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and rural transmen in Kerala.
- **Longitudinal Designs**: Tracking changes in transmen's access to education, healthcare, and employment over time would offer insight into policy impact.
- **Comparative Analyses**: Studies comparing transmen's experiences across Indian states or between transmen and transwomen could uncover differential vulnerabilities and resilience strategies.

Conclusion

Through the lens of a qualitative methodology, this study illuminated the **invisible yet entrenched socio-economic challenges** experienced by transmen in Kerala. Despite the presence of progressive policy frameworks, transmen remain structurally excluded from education, employment, healthcare, and social security. The use of qualitative software enabled systematic coding and thematic analysis, amplifying the voices of transmen and capturing the nuanced, lived dimensions of their marginalization.

The findings underscore the **urgent need for inclusive, context-specific, and transmasculine-centered interventions** that move beyond token representation. By integrating the lived realities of transmen into policy design, academic discourse, and community programming, Kerala—and India more broadly—can take meaningful steps toward gender justice and equity.

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