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EXISTENTIAL COMFORT ASSESSMENT OF ADULTS WITH GENDER DYSPHORIA IN NORTH INDIA: A REFLEXIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Richa Mishra	Statistician cum Assistant professor, Department of Community Medicine, Shri Ram Murti Smarak Institute of medical sciences.
Priyanka Kumar	Professor, Department of Community Medicine, Shri Ram Murti Smarak Institute of medical sciences.
Rupali Gupta	Assistant professor, Department of Community Medicine, Shri Ram Murti Smarak Institute of medical sciences.

ABSTRACT **Background:** The Incompatibility between a person's gender identity & gender assigned at the time of birth is called Gender dysphoria (GD). Living with Gender dysphoria is very challenging for adults. There are several factors that affect their overall existential comfort. **Aim:** Assessment of factors impacting the existential comfort of young adults with gender dysphoria in north India & analyze their coping strategies & future plans regarding gender dysphoria. **Materials & Methods:** This qualitative study was conducted by using open ended questionnaire based online survey. 10 young adults (18-35year) were selected using a snowball sampling method. Collected data was analyzed by a Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach. **Results:** The analyzed data showed that people at 8.5 year age when they first time experienced discomfort with their gender assigned at birth. These data also revealed 9 main themes such as body image dissatisfaction, unsympathetic family dynamics, social friction, career hardship, identity problem, unsupportive academia, Solidarity, chronic distress & transformative effect were categories according to three core concept i.e. physical, societal & psychological comfort. The coping strategies of GD adults were opting or planning for physical changes through surgery or hormones. Financial and societal barriers have prevented from accessing gender-affirming treatment. **Conclusion:** People first experienced gender dysphoria at their childhood stage. The main factors such as body image dissatisfaction, unsympathetic family dynamics, social friction, career hardship, identity problem, unsupportive academia, Solidarity, chronic distress & transformative effect of treatment were impact the overall existential comfort of adults with Gender Dysphoria. Financial & societal barriers were main reasons that prevent these adults to accessing gender affirming treatments

KEYWORDS : Gender dysphoria, Gender identity, Existential comfort

INTRODUCTION

Gender identity is a person's inner sense of being male, female, both, neither, or something else. It refers to how an individual perceives and feels about their own gender. It may or may not match the sex assigned at birth. The conflict between a person's assigned gender at birth and their gender identity is called Gender dysphoria (GD). Based on the diagnostic criteria, gender dysphoria pertains to cases where an individual experiences disconnect between their physical characteristics and their inner feelings or they strongly feel their emotions and responses align with another gender[1].

Gender identity influences every facet of individual's life. Young People with gender dysphoria experience several social challenges including discrimination, social rejection, stigma, feelings of shame, transphobia, and lack of support, as well as psychological challenges like anxiety and depression. These factors negatively impact their overall quality of life[2,3].

Gender dysphoria (GD) often emerges in early childhood and may remain unaddressed for years before individuals begin the process of gender transition. Need for early diagnosis & timely gender-affirming care have the potential to enhance both quality of life and overall well-being[4].

Many individuals with Gender Dysphoria (GD) face suicidal thoughts and attempts. Support and timely gender-affirming care help reduce these risks. However, identity struggles, fear, stigma, and treatment delays increase vulnerability[5,6]

In India, transition-related healthcare is challenging due to high costs, limited specialized providers, and social stigma. Discrimination from healthcare professionals and societal prejudice deter individuals from seeking care. Legal hurdles, including complex procedures and surgery proof for recognition, further restrict access[7]. Lack of awareness about their condition among family members and the public, lack of family support and rejection are also significant barriers to seeking treatment[8].

Despite India's foundation on equality and freedom, individuals with gender dysphoria (GD) still face challenges affecting their existential comfort and rights.A thorough understanding of their comfort requires analyzing real-life experiences. The narratives of individuals with gender dysphoria are vital for deeper insight into their struggles. Research is crucial to bridge awareness gaps, informing the public, healthcare providers, and policymakers. This fosters better health outcomes, especially in North India.

Objective

1. To evaluate the factors impacting the existential comfort of young adults with gender dysphoria in north India.
2. To analyze their coping strategies & future plans with respect to gender dysphoria

MATERIALS & METHODS

Study Design & Setting: Qualitative research design using a Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Study Population & Sampling Method: In this study, 10 young adults who fulfill our inclusion criteria were selected by Snow ball sampling technique.

Study Duration: One month

Study Tool: Open Ended Questionnaire

Inclusion Criteria

Gender dysphoria (DSM-5)- if the individual experiences two or more of these experiences for at least one year

i. a marked incongruence between gender identity and sex characteristics
ii. a desire to be rid of one's sex characteristics
iii. a strong desire for the sex characteristics of the other gender
iv. a strong desire to be the other gender (or an alternative, i.e. non-binary gender)
v. a desire to be treated as being the other gender (or an alternative, i.e. non-binary gender)
vi. a conviction that one has the same feelings and responses as the other gender (or an alternative, i.e. non-binary gender)

- Adults (18 -35years) diagnosed with gender dysphoria.
- Willingness to participate in open-ended questionnaire based online survey.
- Participants residing in the northern region in India.

Data Collection:

An online survey with open-ended questions in Hindi and English gathered personal experiences of gender dysphoria among North Indian adults. The questions focused on factors that impact their

existential comfort. Additionally, questions related to the final solutions adopted by GD adults were also included in the questionnaire. Examples of questions asked in questionnaire were as follows: What do you think about your gender ? What kind of difficulties you face in your daily life due to your gender identity? Do you feel accepted by your family? Share your experiences related to difficulties you face in family/school/college/community? What solutions have you adopted to cope with the problem of gender dysphoria? Etc. the responses were gathered online, ensuring accessibility and confidentiality.

Ethical Considerations:

In this study, all participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. They were fully briefed on the study's purpose, their voluntary involvement, and their right to withdraw without consequence. To ensure confidentiality, participants could use nicknames, and all data was securely stored. This process guaranteed voluntary participation with a clear understanding of the study's aims and procedures.

Operational Definitions:

- **Gender Expression:** The way an individual presents their gender through behavior, interactions, clothing, and other outward expressions.
- **Gender Norms:** Societal expectations regarding how individuals should behave and express their gender.
- **Existential Comfort**: Refers to feeling good and at ease with your body, the society around you, and your own thoughts.

Statistical Analysis:

The researcher applied Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach, involving iterative reading of participant responses to extract primary codes. Similar codes were merged into supporting themes, which were then grouped into main themes, reflecting to 3 core concepts. Both the researcher and peers evaluated theme relevance and coherence, refining them to accurately represent the data. Reliability was maintained through active engagement with supporting themes throughout the main theme extraction process[9,10].

RESULTS:

Table 1: Demographic Profile Of Participants

Participant's code	Age	Education	State	Residential area	Occupation	Living with	Gender assigned at birth	Reassigned gender	Age When You First Experienced Discomfort with Your Gender Assigned at Birth
1	24	Intermediate	U.P.	Rural	Make up artist	Alone	Male	Female	7
2	25	Intermediate	Punjab	Urban	Make up artist	Alone	Male	Female	15
3	28	Graduate	U.P.	Urban	Make up artist	Family	Male	Female	5
4	25	Bachelor in economics	U.P.	Urban	HR	Partner	Female	Male	10
5	28	high school	U.P.	Urban	Garment shop	Family	Female	Male	8
6	35	Graduation in fashion designing	Delhi	Urban	Fashion designer	Alone	Male	Female	7
7	19	Graduated	Delhi	Urban	Private job	Alone	Male	Female	7
8	23	Masters	U.P.	Urban	Cosmetic aesthetician	Family	Male	Female	8
9	25	Graduate	U.P.	Urban	Make up artist	Family	Male	Female	12
10	32	Intermediate	Bihar	Urban	Actor	Friends	Male	Female	6
Mean									8.5 years

Table 1 shows participants' demographics, revealing an average age of 8.5 years for first experiencing gender discomfort in childhood.

Table 2: Supporting Themes And Main Themes

Supporting Themes	Main Themes	Core Concept
Struggle with female characteristic(#5)	Body image dissatisfaction	Physical comfort
Struggle with male characteristic (#8)		
Wants to makeover like female(#10)		
Physical appearance limits my ability to express myself(#1)		
Wearing clothes according to public norm due to fear of being judged (#10)		
Hated myself during my menstrual cycle(#5)		
Hiding masculine's characteristics(*#3)*		
Faced discrimination in family (*#5)*	Unsympathetic family dynamics	Societal comfort
Bad pronounce by family (#6)		
Thrown out from the house(*#6)*		
Feel isolated in family (#7)		
Not accepted by family (#6)		
Family accepted but not supported for surgery(*#1)*		
Family not aware about my condition(#5)		
Conflict Between Personal Dreams and Family Expectations(#3)		
Family forced to marriage(#2)		
Struggle with using public washroom (#9)	Social friction	
Harassed in men's public washroom(#7)		
People always point out my opposite gender attitude like talking sense, my hair growth etc(#3)		
Faced discrimination in society(#6)		
Sometimes not feel safe in public Place(#1)		
Faced negative comments (#6)		
Disrespectful behavior of society (#2)		
Relatives joke on me(#2)		
People force to participate in traditional activities(#4)		
Refusing to give a job (#3)	Career hardship	
Faced discrimination in work place(#10)		
People misunderstand my identity (#3)	Identity problem	
Ragging in college(#2)	Unsupportive academia	
Harassed by teacher(#6)		
Blacklisted by institute due to my gender identity(#7)		
Faced discrimination in School & college(#3)		
Leave school due to harassment(#5)		
Insulted by teacher (#7)		
No one want to friendship in school & college(#3)		
Supported by friends like me (#10)	Solidarity	

Feeling low confident when talking to others(#4)	Chronic distress	Psychological comfort
Self isolated(#9)		
Feeling depressed(#7)		
Suicidal thoughts arise(#8)		
Suffer from panic attack(#7)		
Beating myself(#7)		
Lived with Self-doubt (#1)		
Feeling like I was a mistake of my parents(#7)		
Every day is like a challenge(#9)		
Loneliness(#5)		
Hopelessness(#5)		
After surgery I feel confident & bold (#4)	Transformative effect	

* *Factors impacting the existential comfort*

Table 2 presents that analyzed data were categorized into three core concepts according to 9 main themes. The main themes, Body image dissatisfaction, unsympathetic family dynamics, social friction, career hardship, identity problem, unsupportive academia, Solidarity, chronic distress, Transformative effect were the factors that impact the overall comfort of GD young adults.

Some of the participants' responses were as follows, according to their themes and core concept:

A. Physical comfort:

***Body image dissatisfaction**

Participant#8: *"Whenever I look at myself, I feel like I don't deserve this; it's not who I am. I've caused so many traumas to my body—cuts, burns, bruise. There was a time when I slapped myself until I blacked out."*

Participant#10: *"I face difficulty in choosing clothes because often, I want to wear something different, but to meet societal expectations; I have to wear something else, which makes me feel uncomfortable."*

B. Societal comfort:

***Unsympathetic family dynamics**

Participant#3: *"We have to face discrimination everywhere—within our own family, in society, at school, and in college. It all starts at home. Outsiders speak later, but it's our own family that turns against us first. The father is the first to react, wondering how such a child was even born. Slowly, you start losing your importance in the family. Everyone looks at you differently, as if you have committed a great sin. They begin to prioritize their other children, believing that you are incapable and will bring shame to the family."*

Participant#6:*"I have faced discrimination in my family. They distanced me from themselves and even from home, all because of society's fear. As a young child, I was thrown out because of my different sexuality. I was forced to beg for money, and I had to survive by working at a roadside eatery."*

***Social friction**

Participant#6: *"People in society make negative comments about me. They try to put me down everywhere and constantly compare me to other boys and girls, which feel really unfair and unpleasant."*

***Career hardship**

Participant#3: *"Most of the time, people refuse to give me a job, saying, 'Oh, they are like this.' Or, if they do hire me, it's only for a low-level position where I don't have to interact with people much. But thankfully, some brands support the LGBTQ community, so I worked with them. Most of the people there were supportive, but even then, they would still comment on my external appearance."*

Participant#10: *"One time when I went for an interview, everyone was staring at me. Some even said, 'What will he do? Working? His job is to dance and sing."*

***Identity problem**

Participant#3: *"One time, I was wearing a mask and trying to enter the male washroom when people stopped me, saying, 'Ma'am, where are you going? This is the male washroom."*

"A similar incident happened when I traveled out of town. The hotel management asked for my Aadhaar card, and the staff claimed, 'This is not your card. You're a girl, but you're giving a male's card.' I felt so embarrassed and thought, 'I wish I was a girl."

***Unsupportive academia**

Participant#7: *"If we start with school, other kids used to tease me a lot, saying I acted like a girl. They would hit me, grab me, and harass me. While walking, they would mock me, saying I wouldn't be able to do anything in life, and then run away after saying hurtful things.*

The teachers' behavior was just as strange. Sometimes, they would insult me in front of the entire class, which made it difficult for me to focus on my studies. My family thought I didn't want to study, but they had no idea what I was going through at school. Even if I tried to tell them, they would always blame me instead of understanding my situation."

***Solidarity**

Participant#10: *"My some friends are supportive who alike me"*

C. Psychological comfort

***Chronic distress**

Participant#8: *"This world is the root cause of my depression. I have been feeling suicidal for year. Without anti-depression pill I can't even survive"*

***Transformative effect**

Participant#4: *"After surgery I feel confident & bold"*

Table 3: Coping Responses And Future Plans Of Participants

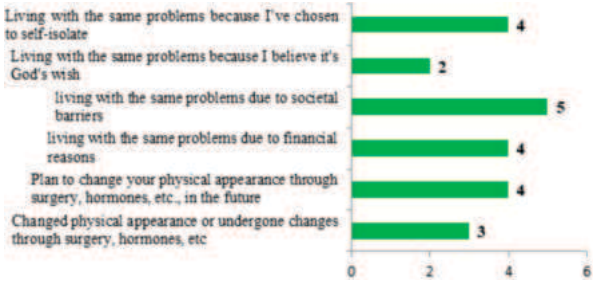

Table 3 shows the multiple responses related to coping strategies & future plans of GD young adults. Three opted for physical changes, four plan future changes, while financial constraints and societal barriers affect four and five, respectively. Two accept their condition due to religion, and four choose self-isolation.

DISCUSSION:

The study evaluated factors affecting the existential comfort of young adults with gender dysphoria in North India. The analysis identified key components impacting their physical, societal, and psychological comfort, including Body image dissatisfaction, unsympathetic family dynamics, social friction, career hardship, identity problem, unsupportive academia, Solidarity, chronic distress, and transformative effect.

Participants reported that their physical appearance limits self-expression; they conceal disliked features and feel uncomfortable wearing gender-normative clothing due to fear of public judgment. Frenzi et al. (2015) found in their study that individuals with gender dysphoria experience higher levels of body dissatisfaction compared to the general population[11]. Similarly, Van de Grift et al. (2016) reported that people with gender dysphoria tend to have lower body satisfaction and experience greater psychological distress related to their physical appearance[12].

Participants in this study identified non-supportive family environment, societal behavior, career hardship, identity issues, unsupportive academic environment, and unit behavior of other GD people as root factors affecting societal comfort. Similarly, Tabaac et al. (2018) in the U.S. found a link between discrimination, mental health, and body image, highlighting that discrimination worsens mental health by increasing depression and anxiety, which negatively impacts body image[13].

GD adults in this study discussed challenges to their psychological well-being, including low confidence, suicidal thoughts, panic attacks,

and depression. Mason, A. et al. (2021) highlighted that gender dysphoria is a chronic stressor, triggering psychological and biological stress responses. It is associated with minority stress, social rejection, stigma, and shame, particularly among young people[3]. Similarly Marconi,E et al.(2023) reported in their study that gender dysphoria (GD) in adolescents and young adults showed higher rates of suicidality, self-harm, and self-injurious thoughts[14].

One of the participants in this study discussed the post-impact of gender-affirming treatment, stating that it made them feel more confident and bold. In their study, Anderson,D et al.(2022) explored the both non-surgical and surgical treatments for gender dysphoria, highlighting their effectiveness in improving mental health and overall well-being. Non-surgical options like hormone therapy and psychotherapy provide significant relief, while surgical interventions further enhance gender congruence and body satisfaction[15].

CONCLUSION:

The findings of the this study shows the numerous factors that affect the overall comfort of adults with gender dysphoria like physical body image, unsympathetic family dynamics, social friction, career hardship, identity problem, unsupportive academia, solidarity, chronic distress, transformative effect. The findings indicate that GD adults suffer from anxiety, depression, and panic attacks. They experience loneliness and have suicidal thoughts, often caused by a non-supportive family and social environment. After seeking gender-affirming treatment, individuals feel more confident. However, the treatments are costly and most parents do not support the surgery due to societal pressure, both are major challenges for people with gender dysphoria seeking gender-affirming treatment.

Recommendation:

Based on the findings of this study, to improve comfort for individuals with gender dysphoria, education is key to reducing stigma. Accessible mental health support, financial aid for gender-affirming care, and inclusive policies in academics and workplaces are essential. Family counseling can enhance support, ultimately improving mental health and overall quality of life.

Limitation Of Study:

This study's findings may not be generalizable beyond the northern region of India due to regional cultural differences.

Relevance Of The Study

This study examines factors affecting the existential comfort of young adults with gender dysphoria in North India, highlighting their struggles and coping strategies. Insights from the study can inform targeted interventions and enhance societal support systems for this population.

Conflict Of Interest: NIL

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