

Gender Identity Matters: Barriers to Employment Cycle of Transgender Individuals in the Labor Market of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Transgender individuals, a vulnerable community in Sri Lanka do not share the same economic opportunities in the labor market as cisgender individuals. This paper examines the barriers faced by transgender individuals in Sri Lanka during three stages of the employment cycle, namely the pre-working stage, the working stage, and the post-working stage. This qualitative study used snowball sampling to select a sample of 25 transgender participants in early adulthood (20–40 years). The in-depth interviews and participatory observations were the data collection methods used. Reflexive thematic analysis is employed for the data analysis with the use of the NVivo analytical tool. This study found that there is no free entry, free stay and free exit for transgender individuals in the Sri Lankan labor market. The labor entry at the pre-working stage is identified to be restricted by the employer's prejudicial attitude at the selection phase, delays in labor entry due to the transition process, and fear of labor entry due to previous negative experiences. Further, this study recognized the absence of free stay during the working stage, mainly due to underemployment, the glass ceiling, hegemonic masculinity, and harassment and discrimination. Moreover, this research has revealed that transgender individuals's freedom to exit their current job is suppressed by the uncertainty of receiving a new job at the post-working stage. In doing so, this study highlights the importance of having a trans-inclusive and equitable workplace policy in every organization.

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Received 06 February 2023; Received in revised form 25 April 2023; Accepted 30 July 2023

Keywords: *Labor Market Barriers, Qualitative Study, Sri Lanka, Transgender Individuals*

Introduction

Background

Gender categories have become more fluid in recent years. With the evolution of sexual perception, state moderators are confronted with the problem of how to formulate policies and make decisions based on new conceptions of sexuality and gender for transgender employees. Sexuality and gender in the workplace are both personal and challenging from a career perspective. According to United Nations definitions, transgender (sometimes abbreviated to "trans") is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of gender-differentiated identities, including transsexual individuals, cross-dressers, and individuals who identify as third gender. According to Johns Hopkins University, the term "cisgender" refers to individuals whose gender identity generally matches that of their biological sex, whereas the term "Transgender" refers to individuals whose gender identity does not match that of their biological sex. Accordingly, an individual assigned to be a female at birth who recognizes on the male spectrum and a person assigned to be a male at birth who recognizes on the female spectrum are described as female-to-male transgender persons (FtM) and male-to-female transgender persons (MtF), respectively. Finally, literature clearly identifies the term "transgender" as the "non-binary" category, which represents gender minorities in society because it is not identified as male or female in the Western binary (Lorber, 2018).

Transgender individuals have reported difficulty securing and maintaining employment as a result of their gender identity. The unemployment rate for transgender individuals is twice as high as that of cisgender individuals (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011). According to that research, about half of transgender individuals have experienced adverse employment outcomes such as being fired, not hired, or denied a promotion solely because of their gender identity or expression. This is greater than the rates of cisgender individuals. For example, 5.6% of transgender individuals reported being fired because of discrimination based on gender identity. Further, 16% of them report not being hired, and 12.7% lose their potential for promotion because of gender-based discrimination

(Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999). Discriminations on the transgender nature have impacted badly on their salaries too, which has created a considerable poverty among the transgender population. Schilt and Wiswall (2008) found that transgender women were generally deprived in terms of salaries after the transition. However, transgender men usually don't notice a difference. Sometimes they have experienced a small increment in salaries too after the transition to masculinity. In terms of skin color, particularly African Americans, manifest poorer employment outcomes than white transgender individuals (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011).

In a global context, transgender individuals are influenced by a number of issues affecting their workplaces. Lack of workplace procedures to ensure that others in the workplace and aware of how to treat a transgender person is seemed as one of the more serious issues. According to Dietert (2009) showed one's coming-out story as a transgender person as a cause for job loss and harassment within the workplace. Dietert also explained that there is less possibility for transgender individuals to reach authoritative job roles. Further, the "bathroom issue" is recognized as another serious issue that causes a huge privacy problem in workplaces and acts as a reason for an increase in discrimination and sexual abuse as well (Elias, Johnson, Ovando, & Ramirez, 2018). All these issues show the strong need for a transgender-friendly, more equitable workplace policy in every organization. Although western countries show a kind of progressive nature in adapting to such policies, Asian developing countries like Sri Lanka stay far behind the requirement.

Sri Lanka's background of transgender employment is relatively hidden because of social unacceptability and legal barriers. According to Equal Grounds Sri Lanka (2021), 14,500 transgender individuals who have come out publicly between the ages of 18 and 65 in 2021. This is approximately closer to 1% of the total population in Sri Lanka. However, the actual count must be higher because of the presence of a large hidden crowd within the country. Transgender individuals, a gender minority in Sri Lanka's population, are often misunderstood by society, and such attitudes emerge even in the workplace. Therefore, not all disadvantaged groups, including transgender groups, a marginalized and vulnerable community in Sri Lanka, shared the benefits of labor force participation equally.

Research Problem

Although Sri Lanka's labor force participation rate calculations are limited to the gender binary of male and female, even our neighboring country, India, surveys all forms of gender, namely male, female, and transgender, when calculating labor force participation rates across the country. Among transgender individuals in urban households, the labor force participation rate was about 41.2% over the survey period (Statista Research Department, India, 2016). In India, more than 50% of transgender individuals are not included in the work force (Naik, 2017). However, the labor force participation of transgender individuals is not a highly focused area in Sri Lanka's labor reforming process. Anyway, transgender individuals are mainly employed in a very specific range of jobs. According to the research findings of the Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (IPID), around 1/5th of the sample of transgender individuals are still unemployed and this is sending up red flags for a serious potential issue in terms of labor force participation in Sri Lanka. The rest is also occupied in jobs such as commercial sex work, the hospitality field, the beauty industry, the NGO sector, etc. Only 2.08% of the sample represented government workers (Institute for Participatory Interaction in Development (IPID), 2016), and that's significantly low. However, most studies on transgender individuals have explored labor market issues without focusing on the stages of the employment cycle. Further, literature has not established the scope to recognize the labor market barriers at each phase of the employment cycle of transgender individuals in the context of Sri Lanka, although transgender labor has been deeply researched in the western world. This research study is intended to fill this empirical and contextual gap through an in-depth, qualitative analysis.

Objective

The aim of this research study is to explore the barriers that transgender individuals face in the Sri Lankan labor market at three (3) stages of the employment cycle, namely: pre-working stage; working stage; post-working stage.

Methodology

This paper examines the barriers faced by transgender individuals in Sri Lanka during the three stages of the employment cycle, namely the pre-working stage, the work stage, and the post-working stage. The entire research is driven by the participatory/advocacy research paradigm which was widely cited as the ideal research philosophy to employ in order to raise a voice for marginalized groups. Although this is not purely an ethnographic research, it adopted most of the features of ethnography because that research approach could complement the participatory research paradigm. Participatory Action Research (PAR) adheres to the ontology that humans are dynamic agents capable of reflexivity and self-change (Kendon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007). Knowledge is embedded in social relations and symbolizes an epistemology of this research paradigm that believes it is most powerful when it is collaboratively produced in action (Hawkins, 2008). The qualitative research methodology in which researchers and participants collaborate to understand social problems and act to create social change is identified as the methodology of participatory research paradigm (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Further, although this study is not purely ethnographic research; it adopted features of the ethnography as the research approach.

This is a qualitative study that used the snowball sampling technique to select a 25 participants (*Appendix 1*) belongs to early adulthood (20–40 years) because the target participant group is bit hidden in the Sri Lankan context due to transphobic attitude. The in-depth interview method was used as the dominant data collection method along with participatory observations. The data collection took about three months, from January to July 2022. The entire interviews were recorded (audio-recorded) with the permission of participants. Ethical approval was requested from Ethics Review Committee for the Research in Humanities and Social Sciences (ERC-HSS) of Faculty of Graduate Studies in the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and all the ethical practices were conducted according to the information provided in the application form.

In this paper, the data gathered was qualitative in nature and therefore subject to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis can cover all aspects of the full data set and then pick a particularly interesting part of those results to investigate in more depth with the narratives of participants, according to Morgon (2017).

This research used a widely cited theoretically flexible approach to Thematic Analysis called the reflexive thematic analysis approach, which was introduced by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2020). There are six phases in the reflexive thematic analysis. According to (Braun & Clarke, 2020), theoretical thematic analysis and inductive thematic analysis are the two ways available to identify potential themes.

This study has adopted inductive thematic analysis to identify themes because it is driven by data instead of theories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The semantic or explicit level and the latent or interpretative level are the two optional levels of identifying themes. With the semantic approach, the analyst is not seeing anything beyond what the participants said. But latent approaches guide analysts to go beyond the semantic content (Braun & Clarke, 2020). This involves interpretative work when developing themes. Therefore, this study used the latent level as the level of identifying themes. Data analysis was facilitated by the NVivo analytical tool. The stages of reflexive thematic analysis introduced by Braun and Clarke were modified in 2020, and this study employed the modified technique (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Analysis and Findings

Thematic Analysis and Findings

Major findings of thematic analysis of the study address the research question “What are the barriers faced by non-binary transgender individuals in the Sri Lankan labor market?”

Three major themes emerged from the data, which are related to the labor market issues faced by transgender individuals in Sri Lanka. Those are: no free labor entry, no free labor stay, and no free labor exit. Major themes and sub themes are presented as follows¹.

No Free Labor Entry: Barriers at Pre-working Stage/ Job Entrance Phase

This study found three sub-themes that restrict free labor entry for transgender individuals at the pre-working or job entrance stage.

¹ When presenting extractions under each theme, pseudonyms are given to participants by the author to protect their personal identity.

Employer's Pre-judicial Attitude

Results proved that opened up transgender individuals are more likely to get rejected at the face-to-face interview phase although they were shortlisted at the CV² selection rounds. As per the findings, a reason for this circumstance is the employer's prejudicial attitude. Accordingly, most of the employers are having unfounded, pigeonholed beliefs or unreasonable attitude in which employers perceive transgender nature of the jobseekers as their personality issue. Therefore, it seems that firms consider "recruitment of transgender individuals especially for the jobs with direct employee-customer touch points" as a black mark for organizational good-will. This fact was proven from the expression of one of the participants, Kaushi (a 29-year-old Trans lady). She said:

*I applied for a part-time job in *** TV, a PEO TV channel for the post of TV presenter. The interview board knew me because I was a popular person on YouTube with the videos I published on the "rights of transgender individuals". I was selected with a good score at the interview. However, the News manager made an unexpected condition to recruit me. He asked me to stop appearing as a transgender person openly on YouTube Videos and other social media platforms" (Kaushi, Male-to-Female transgender (MtF) person).*

As per this statement of Kaushi, entrance to publicly visible occupations like "TV presenter" is not an easy task because of the traditional workplace norms standing against non-binary groups. This clearly depicts that gender identity could outweigh the real skill in the job at the selection stage of transgender job seekers. That is why "being a publicly visible transgender person" becomes a negative point for Kaushi at the interview stage although she had an attractive score which make her qualified for the work.

Similar experience was shared by Nirodha (a 23-year-old Trans man). He expressed:

Ah.... again, in another interview they said, "jobs of this sort do not suit you, just try to join the Army and see how they reply to you!" They might think that I will change back to my previous identity once I get fed-up

² A Curriculum Vitae, or CV for short, are a professional document that summarizes your work history, education, and skills.

with the Army training given to men. They think that a Trans person cannot go ahead. What they want is to make me again a girl (Nirodha, Female-to-Male transgender (FtM) person).

A female-to-male Transgender person, Nirodha is having a negative interview experience at which employer suggests job matches with masculinity at the live interview even though they saw quantifications at the CV rounds. That was totally because of the prejudicial attitude of the interviewers towards gender minority groups. It seems that most of the employers do not see long career journey in the career of a transgender individuals. Therefore, they are reluctant to recruit them as a permanent part of their workplace. That means, “Negative prejudicial attitude of the employers against transgender individuals” acts as the major barrier which obstructs them to enter into the labor market.

Delayed Labor Entry Due to Gender Transition Process

Transgender individuals showed a considerable delay in entering to labor force compared to cisgender individuals due to a couple of reasons. One of the key reasons for this circumstance is the long-time consumption for transition process. Padmawathi (a 33-year-old Trans lady) who has delayed the first job entrance till the age of 33, revealed this aspect through her story. She said:

This is my first job. I did not do at least an internship before. At least no part- time work. I joined this NGO³ at the age of 33 years. This delay happened because of my gender transition process. I have started my Transition after I went to India for my master’s degree when I was 26. The population is larger in India and hormones are not issued as soon as we go to a doctor. Transition is a big process. It is not a quick task. First, we have to pass the psycho matrix test, if not they are not issued. It is a very difficult test and if only someone passes the test, they can proceed the process. Psycho matrix test is supervised by a panel of doctors. There they check whether my mind is ready to accept hormone therapy and eligibility of bearing surgeries because there are side effects like suicide. Therefore, it is a must to pass this test. I passed the test, and then I took the hormone therapy. I have completed my main surgeries and now I’m

³ Non-governmental organizations, or NGOs have no fixed or formal definition, they are generally defined as nonprofit entities independent of governmental influence (although they may receive government funding).

*going to start my work step by step. I am currently working as a case finder in **** (an NGO established to serve the transgender community), I am now working for HIV⁴ prevention and it has been a month since I completed my final surgery (Padmawathi, Male-to-Female transgender (MtF) person).*

A similar incident was experienced by Savindya (a 24-year-old Trans lady). She Said:

I began the Transition process (Hormones Therapy) soon after I finished my schooling. In this process two hormones are activated in our body and it made me stressed. So, we become short tempered and cannot concentrate on any.... It is like dodu Noh (a condition that hard to concentrate on daily work due to stress and fatigue). As I could not concentrate on studies or any job, I paused both for a while (Savindya, Male-to-Female transgender (MtF) person).

According to these responses, it seems that the “absence of supportive workplaces for gender transitions in Sri Lankan context” is a leading bottleneck which delays the labor entry of transgender individuals. In Sri Lanka, individuals have to wait until they attain their adulthood to go for the Transition because there is no any sufficient opportunity for it during their childhood basically because of parental and school unacceptability and social pressure in traditional Sri Lankan society. Therefore, transition process consumes significant time from prime working-age of transgender individuals, and it delays their labor force entrance. In one hand, due to the presence of a large number of steps in the process, individuals have to postpone their labor force entry. On the other hand, mental and physical discomfort created as a result of hormone imbalance occurred during the period of transition also leads towards delaying the entrance to work force. Accordingly, the delay in the labor entry is found as a barrier faced by transgender individuals at the pre-working stage or the job entrance phase.

This finding is further ensured by the participatory observations collected by the researcher when he was attended to a session on gender transition organized by

⁴ HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus that attacks the body's immune system. This is a sexual Transmitted disease.

National Transgender Network (NTN) at its official premises (*Appendix 2*). According to the awareness session, the full gender transition process takes approximately seven (7) years, and the majority of transgender individuals who had undergone a full gender transition are in their early adulthood. According to the observations, lack of work policies that support the gender transition process pushes the researcher to interpret (researcher's view/*etic*) gender Transition as a major cause of labor entry delays.

Fear of Labor Entry Due to Pre-negative Experiences

Primarily because of the negative experiences transgender individuals have gone through, they suffer from the fear of entering the mainstream workplaces due to the uncertainty of acceptance in the workplace. This situation was explained by one of the participants named Hemal (a 27-year-old Trans man). He said:

I had 8A⁵s and 1B⁶ for O/L⁷ exam. So, my family thought that I will be selected to do medicine after completing my A/L⁸ exam. But I had to do even the third shy⁹ in the A/L exam. Obviously, there is a delay in school education because of the stress born from this gender issue. Another major reason for not joining the labor force soon after school is the discouraging pre-negative experiences at school. It happens due to external and internal pressure available for us as Trans individuals. I have not heard a Trans person who have not experienced this during

⁵ Letter "A" grade is reserved for students who score 75-100 marks (results with distinction pass) in the Lanka's Ordinary Level and Advanced Level Examination.

⁶ Letter "B" grade is reserved for students who score 65-74 marks (results with very good pass) in the Sri Lanka's Ordinary Level and Advanced Level Examination.

⁷ The Sri Lanka Ordinary Level (O/L) is a Sri Lankan General Certificate of Education (GCE) qualification conducted by the Examinations Department of the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka. It is based on the Cambridge University Ordinary Level qualification. Passing this exam is a pre-requisite for the Advanced Level examination.

⁸ Sri Lanka Advanced Level (A/L) is a Sri Lankan General Certificate of Education (GCE) qualifying examination, similar to the British A-level, conducted annually by the Examinations Department of the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka. This is the benchmark examination considered to select students getting qualified for state university entrance.

⁹ In Sri Lankan education system, A/L examination is permitted to be conducted for maximum three attempts if previous time results are unsatisfactory. "Third Shy" is the third or last attempt available for A/L examination candidates.

their schooling period (Hemal, Female-to-Male transgender (FtM) person).

According to Hemal, external and internal pressures experienced by a trans person at school discourage their entry into the workforce and he perceived school-time pre-negative experiences as a common scenario of all transgender persons.

A similar idea was shared by Danu (a 25-year-old Trans lady). She Said:

*Yes, I still have a personal stigma whether can I work in a normal place because of the previous personal experiences in my life. It does not mean that I cannot work, but I have a doubt. Not a guilty, a doubt because I have not committed any offence Noh. One of my father's friends offered me a job opportunity in ****¹⁰ but I refused because I am comfortable to work only with Trans individuals. On the other hand (short silence), I cannot bear how other girls (not boys) react on me. And I have now exposed myself to society through ****¹¹ programme as a Trans woman (Danu, Male-to-Female transgender (MtF) person).*

Danu's statement fully demonstrates how transgender individuals prefer to work in a transgender-friendly work environment instead of a discriminatory work environment. That is due to the fear of experiencing difficulties to work in traditional workplaces in the same way as they experienced during their childhood or teenage. It is clear that job preference is also driven by prior negative experiences in one's life. Therefore, the “fear of labor entry due to pre-negative experiences” can be recognized as a barrier for transgender individuals to enter the labor force. It was also observed in the pre-working stage/job entrance phase.

No Free Labor Stay: Barriers at Working Stage

This study found four (4) sub-themes that can be delivered as key barriers for transgender individuals at the working stage.

¹⁰ This is a foreign bank established in Sri Lanka.

¹¹ This is a name of the YouTube programme.

Under-employment

Under-employment occurs when jobs of the workers do not use their skills, education, or availability to work. This term is also used to describe a situation in which workers are employed in low-skill jobs or low-paying jobs. This study found that there is an invisible underemployment crisis with regard to transgender individuals which prevents full-time workers from using all of their skills. This is a kind of under-employment that cannot be measured exactly. At such circumstances, even the transgender workers also do not realize that their skills could be better used elsewhere. Stories of Danu (a 25-year-old Trans lady) showed the issue of under-employment which is seen as a burning issue among the transgender community. She said:

*It's like this..... I had 2As and 1B in the A/L exam that I participated in the commerce stream. I did not apply for university because I was afraid that I will be bullied there. After A/Ls, I did CIMA¹² where I completed up to the operation level. Although I am qualified to do a banking job, I refused it because I love to be in my comfort zone of Trans individuals Once the Transition is over, I met **** (a transgender female) and she told me about this job, then I settled down here (Transgender serving NGO). From here onwards I gradually did my Trans procession, and it was easy and cozy as I met others like me and had access for what I want (Danu, Male-to-Female transgender (MtF) person).*

The expression of Danu clearly showed a mismatch between the educational qualifications/skills and the current job role. Although she has commerce and accounting related educational background that makes her qualified for jobs in the financial sector, she has turned down a high-paying banking job and opted for a contract-basis job as an “HIV Prevention Project Coordinator” at a transgender oriented NGO. Although she worked there full-time, she was not able to fully apply her skills and education to her current job because it was not her path. This highlights that Transgender individuals in Sri Lanka have

¹² CIMA is standing for “Chartered Institute of Management Accountants”. This establishment based in UK offers training and qualification in management accountancy and related subjects.

prioritized the ease of working as “who they are” rather than matching skills with employment and financial benefits.

Another participant, Buwani (a 35-year-old Trans lady) who was a professional dancer currently employed as a sex worker due to availability of zero opportunities to grow as a dancer within the Sri Lankan context. Buwani said:

No...from the very beginning, I am not satisfied doing this (sex works). I consider this only as an earning source. This is not the passion just a thing that I do to earn for living. My passion is to pursue my carrier as a dancer. It is like this, I am a professional dancer but with the system of Sri Lanka, it is bit difficult to work and grow here because of my transgender nature. In Sri Lanka, there is no proper system, and I am not someone who goes with a trend. Therefore, I do this job to live but my passion is for dancing (Buwani, Male-to-Female Transgender (MTF) Person)

Mismatch between the passion or skill and employment is also depicted in the story of Buwani. These reflect an invisible under-employment observed among the transgender groups. Further participatory observations of the researcher proved the truthiness of Buwani’s statement. As explained in the methodology section, the researcher participated in theater festival (*Appendix 3*) that showcased the art talents of transgender individuals. Buwani was one of the performers at the show. Here, Buwani's choreography was the highlight of the show and was so impressive that the audience even got up from their seats to give it a standing ovation at the end of the dance routine. This implies that Buwani is capable of pursuing her career as a professional dancer, (which she previously did well), even though she currently earns money by doing sex works. This participatory observation confirms that under-employment is a primary issue related to labor supply of transgender individuals.

According to Li and Leung (2001), the glass ceiling is the discriminatory barrier that prevents someone from rising to power or responsibility and attaining higher positions in an organization. This is identified as a transparent barrier. However, attention given on Glass ceiling of transgender individuals is limited in past literature. This gap is filled by this study because it recognized how hard it is for transgender individuals to reach top positions in the hierarchy of

organizations although they are qualified for it. As per the findings, on one hand, access to top managerial positions is seen as unachievable to transgender individuals, and on the other hand, the ability to retain in white-collar jobs is limited for transgender individuals although they get a rare chance to reach to such a higher position in an organization. For example, one participant, Nuwan (a 24-year-old Trans man) said:

First, I joined a super center as a floor assistant. Then I was asked to work in the cashier and then I was promoted to chief cashier. They told me to apply for supervisor position in this super center. In fact, I was selected to it, but others did not like me to hold that position as I was a transgender. Other employees had questioned the manager whether they should address me as miss or sir. Then our manager had asked them to just call me by my name without mentioning a specific title. They had refused it and had continuously protested against that promotion I received. They had pointed out that the customers will take it as a joke if I get this supervisor position. Even though, I was qualified for the position, I finally decided to resign from the whole organization. Then I opened a juice bar (Nuwan, Female-to-Male transgender (FtM) person).

Nuwan's story clearly highlights how difficult it is for a transgender person to reach the top position of an organization as someone who is authorized to control another set of workers. Although Nuwan who started the job at the super center as a floor assistant passed few top positions such as cashier and chief cashier, he was unable to reach the highest position called the "supervisor" where he will be receiving more authority to control physical and human resources in a particular section. This shows that, although transgender individuals have sufficient qualifications to climb the career ladder, absence of corporate and social acceptance could act as a transparent barrier which disrupts their career journey ahead solely because of their non-binary gender identity.

Hegemonic Masculinity

According to Connell & Messerschmidt (2005), Hegemonic masculinity is the used to explain a practice that legitimizes dominant position of men in society, and it believes males as superiors and females as inferiors. This research also found that Male-to-Female (MtF) transgender individuals are more likely to

experience employment losses than Female-to-Male (FtM) transgender individuals. This is primarily because of the Sri Lankan traditional attitude of superiority of masculinity and inferiority of femininity. This study recognized that, transgender men with masculinity are welcome in most work settings although transgender women with femininity are predominantly rejected. This finding was supported by a Sri Lankan NGO named Equal Ground (2020). This is what explained as hegemonic masculinity in previous literature and this study found that, it is applicable within Transgender groups too. For example, Chanu (a 26-year-old Trans lady) commented:

In fact, I was bullied in my first workplace¹³ because I was a Trans lady. It's like this, there are two types Noh; one is Trans males the other is Trans females. Trans males means a boy within a girl and Trans female means a girl within a boy. So, I see we (Trans females) as a lamb among a pack of wolves and rans males like a wolf among a herd of lamb, so they have a protection more than us. I felt less protective when working among set of males. That is why I moved out from that Job and started my own-account work here (Chanu, Male-to-Female transgender (MtF) person).

Chanu, a Male-to-Female transgender person perceives normal work environments as less protective not only for women, but also for Trans ladies because femininity is considered as inferiority. That pushes her to isolate herself with works which will be disadvantageous in terms of career growth. Dhanuka (a 28-year-old Trans man), who is currently working at a tourist hotel commented on the hegemonic masculinity applied to transgender community. He said,

According to what I have noticed, usually this carrier problem affects Trans women than Trans men. I think it is because of our tradition (with sorrow). Uhhh...based the way individuals thin in our country; there is a masculine family concept. In other words, decisions are taken by males and they are full of male chauvinism (Smiling). In Sri Lanka, the majority believes that man is superior to the woman. The situation is the same even in areas of the Western province¹⁴ (except Colombo¹⁵). Decisions

¹³ Chanu's first workplace is a garment factory.

¹⁴ Western province is the commercial district of Sri Lanka.

are usually made based on males. Even society considers that being a male-to-female Trans person is a self-degradation than being a female-to-male Trans person. When it comes to female-to-male person, that person is identified as a male and society accepts it. Wow...(Smiling) It is a concept created by themselves. It means if a female becomes a male, it is a promotion and if a male becomes a female, it is a demotion (Laughing) (Dhanuka, Female-to-Male transgender (FTM) person).

Dhanuka's statement also reflects how the traditional patriarchal society in Sri Lanka causes discrimination against Trans women with this feminine nature. The participatory observations of the researcher, further confirmed this finding. One evening, the researcher went to the hotel where Dhanuka is currently working to conduct the interview. When the researcher said the security guard that he wants to meet Dhanuka, the security officer addressed Dhanuka as "Sir". Since then, it was observed that when the guard asked the location of Dhanuka from a room boy who met on the way to take the researcher to Dhanuka's place, he also spoke to Mr. Dhanuka in a respectful manner. The researcher interprets this as a warm welcome for masculinity (researcher's view/ *etic*). As per the researcher's interpretation, it seems some industries in the Sri Lankan labor market brought extra respect to masculinized women over cisgender women.

Harassments & Discriminations

According to Einarsen & Raknes (1997) Harassment is any inappropriate behavior in authority or otherwise that leads to the creation of a toxic workplace. Bullying can manifest itself in many ways. This is a form of discrimination, and it includes bias, physical or mental abuse, etc. The presence of more diverse employees is a root cause for greater harassment observations in workplaces. This too includes marginalizing a particular group in the workplace based on their sexuality or gender identity which is identified as "discrimination". In many Sri Lankan workplaces, gender minorities such as transgender individuals are discriminated against their gender. This is a pervasive form of bullying that can lead the victim group to feel belittled and discourage the transgender employees to stay within the work. This idea is supported by Rohani (a 40-year-old Trans lady). She said:

¹⁵ Colombo is the commercial capital city of Sri Lanka.

There, I had to cut fruits in order to make fruit juice. I had to cut and peel them. Apart from that I worked in chutney and sauce sections as well. But I did not receive any respect. It was so unfair that they exploited my labor and did not pay the salaries properly. I received only about 11 000 rupees per month (Comparatively a very low salary in Sri Lankan context). I remained there as I was unable to work somewhere else. I was afraid to face and get used to a totally new, unfamiliar environment because of my gender. I was bad at mathematics, but I calculated my salary and figured out that they were not paying me the exact amount of money I should be paid. However, it was a real struggle. Yet, I somehow managed to work there for five to six years. They exploited my labor (with sorrow mixed anger) (Rohani, Male-to-Female transgender (MtF) person).

Rohani's experience at a fruit juice company reflects gender-based differences in pay. As there are fewer employment opportunities for transgender individuals in Sri Lanka, employers tend to exploit transgender labor for low wages. Furthermore, sexual harassments were appeared as another important barrier for transgender employees within their work settings. For example, Kaushi (a 29-year-old Trans lady) said:

One day, our senior NEWS producer, a man around 45 years met me at the canteen and made an unethical sexual bribery request. He said that his wife is not at home as she took a foreign tour. I was not into to such matters although I am a transgender person. But he saw me as a sexual material as the majority does today. At the canteen, I loudly blamed at him despite him getting uncomfortable in front of everyone (with anger). However, after this incident, he had taken actions to cut my name from the NEWS roaster. Not only that, he had spread a bad word of mouth about me among directors too (Kaushi, Male-to-Female transgender (MtF) Person).

Above participant reported sexual (verbal and physical) harassment, which he passed on. It seems that the mismatch between the physical body and the mental interior is a major reason for society to see them as sex objects. It not only affects the physical health of transgender individuals, but also affects their

mental well-being. According to the findings, this can reduce work productivity of transgender individuals or led them to move out from that job.

This finding was further supported by the researcher's participatory observations. On the first day visit to office premises of one of the transgender NGOs, the gate was kept fully locked even during day-time of a working day. However, the researcher entered the office after contacting a known officer of that NGO. When the researcher questioned why the gate was kept locked even during office hours, they replied that all the main entrances were locked to prevent entry of unknown outsiders for the safety of their employees. The researcher interpreted this observation as the fear of transgender individuals in facing harassments (researcher's view/*etic*). Moreover, Transgender employees working in Trans-inclusive workplaces seem to perceive the world beyond their workplace gates as an unsafe environment for them.

No Free Labor Exit: Barriers at Post-working Stage

It was not easy for transgender individuals to leave their current job because they know that it is not simple for them to move from one job to another. This research found that the freedom to leave the current job is suppressed by the uncertainty of receiving a new job. For example, one of the participants, Aksha (a 37-year-old Trans lady) said:

I got a job at hardware through a contact of my uncle. It was not an attractive job for me because it contained heavy works that male minor staff has to do. Do you know, (with sorrow) that I was raped by thug boys in every month. But I did not complain it to Uncle, because if he decides to lay off me for my protection, then I will not be able to find another earning source with no family support. This job was also received thanks to the uncle (Aksha, Male-to-Female transgender (MtF) person).

Aksha endured the physical and mental stress experienced while working in the hardware. On the one hand, she was doing an uninteresting job, and on the other hand, she had faced many depressing experiences like sexual abuse. However, she decided to continue working despite the impairment due to the uncertainty of finding a new job if she left her current job. This has reduced her work productivity. In another example, Rohani (a 40-year-old Trans lady) has

expressed how she failed to find a new job after leaving the initial job. She commented:

What they thought was that I would not leave the company because of my Transgender nature and most of the companies refuse to recruit such individuals. I worked at an internal catering service for one year and I left the job due to continuous discriminations and low salary. Then, with thousands of dreams, I went to Dubai to find a job when our system doesn't create a space for me. Unfortunately, the Sri Lankans living there did not help me to find a job as I am a transgender. Arabs, Indians, and Pakistanis were so interested in us. None of the companies recruited me and even my relatives living in Dubai were ashamed to introduce me to the recruiters. What they did was sending me a visa and kept me there for 3 months till the visa got expired (Rohani, Male-to-Female transgender (MtF) person).

Rohani's case illustrated the real fate of transgender individuals if they leave their jobs. Although Rohani harbored dreams of settling in a foreign destination, even the locals who invited her to Dubai avoided introducing her to another employer to protect their own reputation. Both Aksha and Rohani's statements clearly exhibit how difficult it is for transgender individuals to leave a job because of the difficulty of finding another job. Accordingly, transgender workers do not have free exit from employment due to post-work stage uncertainty.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to the results, the employers prejudiced attitudes obstruct the free labor entry of transgender individuals. This finding is followed up by Mizock and Lewis (2008). They emphasized “prejudice attitude or negative attitudes of employers toward transgender identity” as a risk factor for experiencing trauma in transgender individuals. Similarly, Hernandez (2020) explained how prejudice attitude existed against transgender individuals even from the top government level. It reported that the Department of Defense operated under President Trump's administration in USA, ban military service on transgender individuals due to the prejudice attitude and further, the Department of Housing and Urban Development started planning to remove laws which protected

homeless transgender individuals (Hernandez, 2020). This implies that transgender labor entry can be largely influenced by prejudice attitude grown within the government and business industries. A delay due to the transition process is another barrier found in the pre-working stage of the transgender employment cycle. This result was slightly supported by an empirical work of the University of Wisconsin-Madison (Budge, Tebbe, & Howard, 2010). Although it recognized gender transition as a long-term and time-consuming process, it did not address its impact on labor supply. This study fills that literature gap by identifying the resulting labor entry delay with empirical evidence. Moreover, fear of labor entry due to prior negative experiences is found to be a barrier to labor entry. A similar finding was followed by previous scholars and recognized “childhood negative experiences” as a key restricting factor of future well-being of transgender individuals (Capous-Desyllas & Barron, 2017). Previous empirical studies also spotlighted the adverse effects of transgender youth encountering negative experiences at school as a fact which discourage employees from entering to the job that they are passionate about (McGuire, Anderson, & Toomey, 2010).

Although the National LGBTQ Task Force in the USA (2023) recognized unemployment as a dominant problem with regard to transgendered labor in a global context, this study found underemployment to be the leading issue in the Sri Lankan context. Working for low wages is recognized as a salient feature of underemployment (Feldman, 1996). Therefore, the findings of the current research further support this concept. According to the results, glass ceiling effects was identified as one of the key issues facing transgender individuals during the working stage. Much of the research in the past literature revolved glass ceiling concept around "women." Gendered glass ceiling disparities in the workplace focused on sociology research found that females are facing glass ceiling effects in organizations (Purcell, MacArthur, & Samblanet, 2010). Further, Powell and Butterfield identified glass ceiling as a serious issue for females in the field of “Management” (Powell & Butterfield, 2015). Literature had paid less attention on glass ceiling effect experienced by the transgender community. Although, male and female employees ascend the ladder of success, it is not same or easy for transgender individuals (Frendo, 2019). The finding of workplace harassments and discriminations is supported by previous scholarly works too.

Accordingly, transgender victims of gender-based discrimination, harassment, violence, and rejection by co-workers and community are recognized as the individuals who showed higher rates of suicidal behavior (Virupaksha, Muralidhar, & Ramakrishna, 2016). This implies how hard it is to bear the pressure of harassments and discriminations. This fact was supported by the above finding of this study. Further, this research further found that Male to Female (MTF) transgender individuals are more likely to experience employment losses than Female to Male (FTM) transgender individuals. This finding was supported by a Sri Lankan NGO named Equal Ground (2020). According to all these possible phenomena, introduction of quota system for employment of transgender individuals, creating trans-inclusive work environment by supporting the employee's gender transition in the workplace, Enacting a comprehensive law to protect the rights of the transgender community, Ensuring Transgender visibility and inclusion in leisure space , Fostering equity in education for transgender learners can be presented as feasible policy recommendations to expand the labor force participation of transgender individuals in Sri Lanka.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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Appendix 1: Participants

	Pseudonym	Age (Years)	Transgender Identity	Education (Highest Academic Qualification)	Current Occupation	Previous Occupation/s
1	Prasad	32	Female-to-Male (FtM)	Senior Secondary Education	NGO worker	Automobile garage worker
2	Kaushi	29	Male-to-Female (MtF)	Tertiary Education ¹⁶	NGO worker	TV Presenter, Journalist
3	Chanu	26	Male-to-Female (MtF)	Senior Secondary Education ¹⁷	Own-account salon worker	Garment factory worker, Hair dresser in other's salons
4	Nuwan	24	Female-to-Male (FtM)	Collegiate ¹⁸	NGO worker	Cashier at a Super Centre, Juice Bar Keeper
5	Nirodha	23	Female-to-Male (FtM)	Collegiate	Unemployed	None
6	Hemal	27	Female-to-Male (FtM)	Tertiary Education	Officer at a meat shop	None

¹⁶ Tertiary education in Sri Lanka is an optional final stage of formal learning after secondary education. Higher education, also known as tertiary education, is often taught at universities or degree-granting institutions.

¹⁷ In the context of Sri Lanka, the "Senior secondary" level of education includes 14-16 years of schooling or education up to GCE Ordinary Level Education.

¹⁸ In the context of Sri Lanka, the "Collegiate" level of education includes 16-19 years of schooling or education up to GCE Advanced Level Education.

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7	Padmawathi	33	Male-to-Female (MtF)	Tertiary Education	NGO worker	Unemployed
8	Danu	25	Male-to-Female (MtF)	Collegiate	NGO worker	Financial Institute worker
9	Radini	27	Male-to-Female (MtF)	Collegiate	NGO worker	Assistant at a Pharmacy
10	Buwani	25	Male-to-Female (MtF)	Junior Secondary Education	Sex Worker	Professional Dancer
11	Aksha	37	Male-to-Female (MtF)	Collegiate	NGO worker	Computer shop keeper, Hardware worker, Hotel Manager (for short-term)
12	Dhanuka	28	Female-to-Male (FtM)	Collegiate	Social activist, Worker in tourism industry	Hotel Worker (Foods & Beverage Department)
13	Sanath	33	Female-to-Male (FtM)	Senior Secondary Education	Insurance company officer	Self-employed business rep
14	Nilantha	27	Female-to-Male (FtM)	Tertiary Education	Unemployed	Intern at buying & selling company
15	Shehan	22	Female-to-Male (FtM)	Junior Secondary Education	Own-account worker (Electronic Equipment Repairing Works)	Supermarket assistant
16	Rohani	40	Male-to-Female (MtF)	Junior Secondary Education	Unemployed	Fruit Juice chef, Airline Catering Chef, Hotel chef, Sex worker,

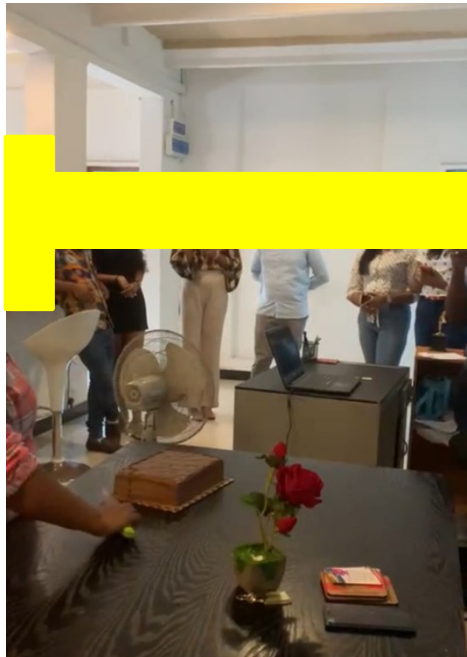
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						Office Cleaner
17	Asini	32	Male-to-Female (MtF)	Junior Secondary Education	Unemployed	Vegetable seller, SPA worker,
18	Ayoma	34	Male-to-Female (MtF)	Junior Secondary Education	Sex Worker	Housemaid worker, Tailor
19	Neela	33	Male-to-Female (MtF)	Junior Secondary Education	Garment factory worker	Self-employed clothes seller, Patient care giver
20	Savindya	24	Male-to-Female (MtF)	Collegiate	Beautician	Pre-school teacher
21	Kalka	29	Female-to-Male (FtM)	Collegiate	Army Driver	Tuition Lecturer, Cab Driver
22	Deshan	31	Female-to-Male (FtM)	Collegiate	Officer at LGBT led international organization	Officer at a finance company
23	Raj	22	Female-to-Male (FtM)	Senior Secondary Education	NGO worker	Marketing employee at an online sales company
24	Janaki	35	Male-to-Female (MtF)	Collegiate	Own-account worker (Tailor)	Hotel Chef, Garment factory worker
25	Ramal	32	Female-to-Male (FtM)	Senior Secondary Education	School Rugger Coach	Lady Gym Trainer

Appendix 2: Transgender Workplaces

3rd Week of July 2022

NAME	REGISTER	REACH	TESTING	NUMBER OF CONDOM DISTRIBUTE	H*
[REDACTED]	M				
[REDACTED]	T				
[REDACTED]	W				
[REDACTED]	Th				
[REDACTED]	F				
[REDACTED]	Sa				
[REDACTED]	S				
Weekly Total		29	10/9	935	
[REDACTED]	M				
[REDACTED]	T				
[REDACTED]	W				
[REDACTED]	Th				
[REDACTED]	F				
[REDACTED]	Sa				
[REDACTED]	S				
Weekly Total		19	10/6	870	



Appendix 3: Transgender Theatre Festival

