

Third in gender, last in line?

Despite being recognised as equal citizens by the constitution, transgender people are hardly being treated equally for Covid-19 vaccination



AFIA JAHIN

access to the jabs, leaving them unprotected against the coronavirus. If this discrimination is not dealt with quickly, then not only will this community continue to suffer, but it will be seen as a grave medical and moral failure of the country as well.

The official figure for Bangladesh's third gender population, commonly referred to as *hijra*, is a perfectly—and suspiciously—rounded 10,000, according to a 2013 survey by the Ministry of Social Welfare. However, the real number has not only increased in the decade or so since then, but can also be assumed to be inaccurate, according to organisations working on the rights of the community.

While Article 28 of Bangladesh Constitution dictates that there can be no discrimination against any citizen based on religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, it was not until late 2014 that the government officially recognised the transgender community as the “third gender.” Those who had already registered for their national ID (NID) cards before that time had to do so using the name and gender specified on their birth certificate. Now that the NID is still the only document using which the general populace can register for the Covid-19 vaccine, third gender people are being subjected to even more discrimination and trauma on the basis of their gender identity.

The story of Tanisha Yasmin Chaity, as reported by this daily last month, is the epitome of what the transgender people fear they will have to face at vaccination centres.

A young transwoman and a development worker based in Cox's Bazar, Chaity's experience tells us all we need to know about how unfair this country's treatment of this community still is. As she stood in the female queue at the vaccination centre, Chaity was anxious about being subjected to harassment at the inoculation booth itself, while those in line were uncomfortable due to their ingrained bigotry. And she was not wrong about being harassed: when the man at the desk called her by her registered birth name, Mamun Mollah, and she appeared, he seemed to be unaware of the term “transwoman.” Chaity argued with him, trying to justify why she should be able to get her vaccine too. This, unfortunately, only attracted taunting from others in the queue. When she was eventually able to convince the clerk to let her go to the inoculation booth for females, the same type of ignorance was displayed by the staff there, causing Chaity further humiliation.

As appalling as it sounds, the bias of regular people against those belonging outside the gender binary of male and female is somewhat understandable (for lack of a better word). After all, discrimination against transgender people is the norm of our culture, and they are essentially deprived of any decent treatment in everyday life. Most people don't know any better, and don't feel the need to peek outside of their bigoted cocoon either. But what excuse can healthcare workers of the state show for not even being aware of transgenderism, and consequently making an already cumbersome procedure even more difficult for people like Chaity? Given that those running the vaccination centres are representatives of the government, are they not also obliged to abide by Article 28 and equally accommodate all citizens of the country who want to be vaccinated?

While Chaity did finally get her first dose, stories such as hers wherein people of this community managed to get vaccinated—albeit with difficulty—are few and far between. But since they don't attract much news coverage and the government is not



Our gender identity is not something our healthcare workers should stop even for a second to consider when it comes to administering Covid-19 vaccines to those who want it. Why? Because our constitution says so.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

very forthcoming about their plight, we don't know if remedial measures are being taken. We don't have updated figures of their rate of vaccination either. Most do not have the minimum digital literacy required to complete the registration process through the government's Surokkha platform. Many of them, because of this and the humiliation and harassment that come with trying to obtain this vital service, have likely felt discouraged to go for the vaccine themselves. As a result, one can assume, tens of thousands of members of this community—a population whose choice of livelihood often requires them to be outdoors and in contact with many people daily—are forced to remain unvaccinated.

There are a number of loopholes in place that can actively prevent the transgender people from getting vaccinated or even tested for Covid. For one, the daily vaccination

update prepared by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) only provides an update of the number of men and women inoculated, with no room for counting the transgender population. This sort of discrimination and micro-biases may seem insignificant, but they play a vital role in making the systematic discrimination faced by them socially acceptable.

There seems to be a lot of backward and forward steps in terms of stopping transphobia from being the norm. The year 2020 saw the establishment of Dawatul Quran Third Gender Madrasa, in the Kamrangirchar area of Dhaka—the first known school in Bangladesh dedicated to transgender students. However, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) has yet to conduct the long-overdue sixth national census of the country, which was supposed to include people of the third gender

What I learnt from Kamla Bhasin



TASMIAH T RAHMAN

been an important voice not only for the women's movement in India, but other South Asian countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal as well. She founded the feminist network Sangat in 2002. Her tools to raise awareness against patriarchy and violence against women, including rape and dowry death, often involved interactive methods such as plays, story-telling, music and art. According to the *Indian Express*, at Kamla Bhasin's funeral on September 25, everyone stood silently as her sister performed the last rites. Afterwards, a young woman began a “conversation” with her, addressing her as if she were alive. Words turned into a song, and soon the whole gathering of feminist activists—people from diverse backgrounds and those whose lives Kamla had touched—began singing along. Even in death, she showed us how to unite.

Kamla was actively involved in JAGORI, a women's training and resource centre in New Delhi, India, as well as One Billion Rising, the movement started by American playwright-activist Eve Ensler to end sexual violence against women, which spread out across the world—including Bangladesh. She touched the lives of thousands of women through her trainings and workshops on understanding patriarchy and feminism. A few basic concepts that she taught—which show her deep understanding of the feminist movement, but also cover issues affecting the world on a larger scale—are as follows:



The legacy of Kamla Bhasin will continue to inspire women's and human rights activists everywhere, for long.

PHOTO: PTI

Big words, but what do they really mean? We need to ask about the basic definitions of patriarchy, masculinity, gender, and feminism. These words are often misunderstood—oftentimes, even by the most privileged sections of our society. One of the terms that Kamla stated was toxic masculinity, and she used to speak about how it affects not just women, but men as well. In Bangladesh, men are taught to be tough and feel superior; they are expected to have all the answers, to be solution-driven, to earn more, to provide more. These predestined roles are burdens on men. As products of this toxic culture, most men, as heads of their households, do not allow their wives or daughters to work outside, which only adds to their burden.

It is the same with the word “gender”; gender roles are defined by society. As such, if men and women in our society could understand that, other than giving birth and breast-feeding their children, men could be equal participants in child-rearing, then life would be much easier for both parents. It is society that teaches men that childcare is a woman's job, and to this day it is the norm for women to take the sole responsibility of taking care of the children and elderly members in their families. This doubles the pressure on women who work: they have to meet their responsibilities at their workplaces, and then fulfil their role of caregiver at home as well—something that remains unappreciated in most cases. If the concept of equal participation is introduced

as part of education at schools, boys and girls will learn that household work and care-giving can be done by both.

We have normalised injustice Kamla highlighted that injustice in society had grown so much because we tolerated it. There are plenty of examples around us: let's take the ongoing vaccine shortages in less developed countries like Bangladesh, for instance, where there are people who haven't been able to get even the first dose of Covid-19 vaccine, whereas in the developed nations, a variety of vaccine choices are available, and they have stocked up the surplus. The Covid-19 crisis has shown how the informal economy workers have fallen further into poverty with reduced wages, unemployment, and the lack of wider social protection from the government. We have become used to a world that is unjust based on gender, race, class, and creed. In order to tackle this, we first need to acknowledge this flaw, and work towards making our country a just place by challenging the unjust system.

Feminism is about equal rights, not taking men's rights away

Feminism is a belief system that says women and men have equal rights. Giving equal rights to women as men doesn't mean that men lose their existing rights. Both men and women can be feminists, just as both men and women can be patriarchal. Feminism, in Kamla's opinion, has to be a powerful yet patient movement, and cannot be won without continuous dialogue. Patriarchy is so ingrained in us that we often don't realise when we practise it—how it invades our thoughts and actions. However, feminist movements evolve with time. Fifty years ago, the fight to ensure that girls go to school was a feminist movement; today, demanding that women be able to be in the streets without the fear of sexual harassment is a timely feminist movement. It also varies from place to place, from class to class. Looking at the world through a woman's eyes is essential, because till now the world has been seen and explained from men's perspectives, and that only reveals half of reality.

Personally, I came to know Kamla Di through a workshop. Brac once organised a training workshop with her, and I had the good fortune to be a part of it. It was in early 2020. We were travelling together towards Rajendrapur one evening, but due to heavy traffic, we were stuck on the road for almost six hours. This is when I got to know Kamla Di—the person behind the feminist trailblazer that she was regarded as. Apart from her lucid style of communicating her thoughts and ideologies, she was witty, warm, and very loving. There were three of us in our car, so she asked us to sing while we waited in traffic. She sang her songs of freedom and movement. Her songs were about the struggles of women and the hope for a new world, which I found quite captivating. At the end of the training, she took a selfie with each of us. I still remember her powerful presence and her warm hug—the memories of which I will always carry with me.

Tasmiah T Rahman is head of Brac's Skills Development Programme.

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BRIAN GREENE
American theoretical physicist
(born February 9, 1963)

Science is the process that takes us from confusion to understanding in a manner that's precise, predictive and reliable—a transformation, for those lucky enough to experience it, that is empowering and emotional.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

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12 Speculate
13 Positive-thinking
14 Some turns
15 Strange
16 Try for a pin
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20 Stiller of films
21 Helps out
23 Gallery fill
24 Ride the waves
26 Price holders
28 Engine sound
29 Beige

31 Sphere
32 Mortar's mate
36 Bridge support
39 Crayon makeup
40 Like haunted houses
41 Native group
43 Espresso order
44 More rational
45 Tart fruits
46 Liquefy

DOWN

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2 Stay clear of
3 Comes to earth
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5 Bagel feature
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7 Wrapping paper

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11 Blighter
17 Cardinal
19 Paving goo
22 Block surrounds
24 Dreamlike
25 Author Eco
27 Switz. Neighbor
28 Travel stops
30 PFC's superior
33 Binding need
34 Record company
35 Bring to bear
37 Locale
38 Course needs
42 Flock father

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

FISHES

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LID

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UNO

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PRIORS

SANTAS

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

HAMMIE, DID YOU BRUSH YOUR TEETH?

YES*

MOM ALWAYS READS THE FINE PRINT.

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

WHY IS THIS ALL OUT HERE ?

I CLEANED OUT THE CLOSET

OTTO WANTED HIS OWN OFFICE