

Experiences of Discrimination among the Irish Transgendered Community

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ABSTRACT

This project aimed to discover the challenges faced by the Irish transgendered community in contemporary Ireland. The current literature on the issues that the transgendered community face was reviewed and data from a sample of the population was gathered in a semi structured in depth interview. A thematic analysis was then carried out. The project sought to understand the problems which affect the community from an institutional to an individual level. By linking the themes to the literature reviewed, one central issue emerged from the overall analyses which was misconceptions of transgenderism. The researcher found that this prevailing theme is central to this project on the Irish transgender community.

INTRODUCTION

The Experience of Discrimination among the Irish Transgendered Community is an explanatory qualitative research study. The participants for the study will be a sample from the transgendered community in Ireland, approached via organisations and personal acquaintances. The participants will be asked a set of questions to determine their subjective experiences on the current issues in which the community face, in non structured one to one interviews. A thematic analysis will be carried out and an investigation into the data while linking to the literature review is how this project will be conducted to obtain the ventral findings. *The Experience of Discrimination among the Irish Transgendered Community* will help explain und underpin key areas in which the community are affected in their day to day lives while living in contemporary Ireland.

Defining Transgender

In the report *Transphobia in Ireland*, McIlroy (2009) defined the term of transgendered people as “individuals whose gender expression and/or gender identity differs from conventional expectations based on the physical sex they were assigned at birth” (pg.3). The term Transgender is considered an ‘umbrella term’ for people who do not identify with the gender of their birth or conform to the gender norms and stereotypes of their society, as there are several categories which fall under the term, including; “transsexuals, transvestites, cross dressers, drag queens & kings, intergender and gender queers” (TENI, 2009, p.4). For the purposes of this research, the terms transgender, transpeople or trans community will be used.

Gender role constraints and expectations impose many boundaries on expected gender behaviour. In *The Gendered Society*, Kimmel (2008) describes gender expectations as being in accordance to male and female identity within their societal norms and values. Traditionally, and in most societies, masculinity and femininity are seen in binary form and are complimentary to each other, masculine being seen as hard, strong, tough and feminine being soft, gentle, docile. These gendered societal constraints on expected behaviour show children at an early age what they are supposed to be doing in accordance with their gender. There are certain restrictions for boys and certain restrictions for girls. If the child shows an interest outside of their norm, they are quickly apprehended or chastised by their peers for choosing the ‘wrong’ interest. Kimmel (2008) describes how gender identity develops more pertinently at puberty. Children develop their sense of identity through socialisation with their peer groups and through social messages that surround them daily through the media about “what men and women are supposed to act like” (p.107). The social construction of gender identification is highlighted. With transgendered people, this

feeling of disconnection with their gender carries on through adolescence with the biological changes in their bodies often been described as a “traumatic experiences which can lead to further mental health issues such as depression or anxiety” (Kimmel, 2008, p.285). In adulthood, when a person who participates outside of their gender stereotype, it is generally accepted in the capacity of mock or ridicule in the form of entertainment such as cross dressing or drag queen shows and even, more recently can be seen when transgendered entertainment takes on a different level with the ‘Ladyboys of Thailand’, which include shows such as beauty pageants.

Gender Identity Disorder

Kimmel (2008) states that transgendered people feel a “persistent discomfort and sense of inappropriateness about ones assigned sex” (p.285) and want to change their biological sex to match their felt gender identity. Gender Identity Disorder (GID) or Gender Dysphoria is a medical diagnosis for a person who feels their biological sex doesn’t match with their internal sense of gender identity. Gender Identity Disorder is featured as a psychological disorder and has been published in the *Diagnostical and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders (DSM)*. After therapy and hormonal treatment, some may choose to go through sexual reassignment surgery (SRS), a process which transitions the physiological areas of the body that the patient feels they need to change in order to feel more in accordance with the gender they which self identify. Coupled with hormonal therapy, which affects characteristics such as voice, skin and hair production, the transition to the other gender in the biological and physical senses often gives the person a sense of relief that they can live in the body of the gender they most identify with.

However, there is much controversy as to whether transgenderism should be viewed as a mental illness or whether a person wishing to pursue a gender reassignment surgical operation must be diagnosed with a pathological disorder and administered with therapy in order to fulfil their healthcare needs in becoming transsexual. In 2010, the Equality Authority Submission to the Gender Recognition Advisory Group highlighted the concerns of Thomas Hammarberg, Commissioner of the Council of Europe Commission for Human Rights, who criticised approaches that seek to pathologise transsexual and transgendered people. In the Council of Europe Issue Paper *Human Rights and Gender Identity*, The Commissioner emphasises, in particular, the risk of placing too much influence in the hands of mental health professionals, at the expense of the autonomy of transsexual people as ‘subjects who are responsible for their own health needs.’ He notes also that ‘from a human rights and health care perspective no mental disorder needs to be diagnosed to give access to treatment for a condition in need of medical care’ (Council of Europe [COE], 2009, p.7).

Gender identity does not relate to sexual identity, the 2011 Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Transgender Equality Network Ireland paper on *Gender Identity in the Workplace Guide* states that transgendered people have the same sexual orientations as everybody else, be they straight, gay, bi-sexual, lesbian, asexual, or celibate (pg.5). Cross dressing or transvestitism are not particular ‘symptoms’ of a disorder, but simply a desire to wear the clothes of the other gender. Often can be seen with ‘drag queen’ shows which are particularly popular as a gay subculture but does not necessarily relate to gender identity disorder or sexual orientation.

Transgenderism in other Cultures

A binary view of gender seems to be a Western cultural phenomenon, as in many other cultures, gender is viewed quite differently, often there are references to a 'third gender'. In Samoan culture, gender expression that is; 'the external manifestation of one's' desire to identify with a certain gender' (TENI, 2011, p.5) is recognised and those who express themselves in another gender are known as Fa'afafine. Bartlett and Vasey (2006) describe Fa'afafines as "a heterogeneous group of androphilic males, some of whom are unremarkably masculine, but most of whom behave in a feminine manner in adulthood" (p.659). If a child poses certain characteristics with the other gender or they themselves identify with the other gender then the community will treat them accordingly.

In *Neither Man Nor Woman*, Nanda (1999) describes the role of 'Hijras' in India. The Hijra in Indian society is seen as a role that is given to them by God, a blessing or calling and not all cross dressers can be considered Hijra. The Hijra however are viewed as being sexually impotent or as eunuchs. They are not looked upon in the same way as transgendered people, for they are seen as having no gender or sexuality at all (pg.5). Although some Hijra in India may be linked to the sex trade much like the Ladyboys or 'Kathoeys' of Thailand. The Thai Kathoey culture is accepted due to largely relaxed attitudes on same sex and transgender behaviours, and acts have been largely ignored by religious and legal authorities. When trading with the west during the Victorian ages, the Siamese tried to assimilate western values and with laws against homosexuality were written into legislation but there is not one record of it ever being enforced, possibly due to little Buddhist condemnation of same sex relations (Jackson, 2003, n.p.). The Hijras mostly differ from the Ladyboys however as they are perceived as cultural or religious symbols and are often found

entertaining and performing at religious rituals. Nanda continues to describe gender identity in other cultures, particularly the 'two spirits' in North America, known as 'The Alyha' in the Mojave tribe, who are accepted into the community much in the same way as the Samoan Fa'afafines (Nanda, 1999, p.132). The binarism of gender identity in western culture has perhaps made it difficult for western societies to accept the idea of the possibility of other genders.

Transphobia

Transphobia is a term that highlights a reality in which transgendered people suffer on a day to day basis. Transphobia is most likely the root cause for their discrimination. Transphobia is defined by the McIlroy in the TENI report as; 'the fear of, aversion to, discrimination against, dislike or hatred of people who are trans, or are perceived to challenge conventional gender categories of male/ female' (TENI 2009 pg.4). The report also states that "*transphobia can result in individual and institutional discrimination, prejudice and violence...and is a variant of homophobia understood as hatred of the queer, where 'queer' means any form of sexuality and/or gender that deviates from the norm of reproductive heterosexuality*" this can be due to a lack of knowledge or understanding on the subject of transgenderism and is the most likely cause for transphobia and discrimination. The 2009 McIlroy report on Transphobia in Ireland continues to add that transphobia in the Irish context is still an understudied area and Transgender individuals are often not distinguished or distinguishable in LGBT research. The lack of understanding of the community can be seen through recent court cases which highlighted the few provisions for transpeople in Irish legislation, which has denied equal protection and recognition leaving the Irish trans

community open to further harassment, discrimination, marginalisation and violence and afforded a diminished ability to enjoy their rights as Irish citizens.

Transgenderism in Ireland

A 2011 HSE report found that ‘Although the situation for the LGBT community in Ireland has undergone significant positive changes, it is likely that people continue to conceal or deny their sexual identity, as many still face discrimination in several areas of their lives’ (pg.19). Legislation to give recognition to transsexuals was introduced under obligation by the Equality Authority in 2004, under the Employment Equality Acts 1998 to 2007 and the Equal Status Acts of 2000 and 2004 after a ruling from the European Courts of Human Rights following a court case highlighting discrimination in Ireland of the right to identity of transgendered people. In 2007, Mr. Justice McKechnie in his judgement in the second set of proceedings in *Foy v an t-Ard Chlaraitheoir, Ireland and the Attorney General* highlighted “*that the state had failed or declined to provide evidence of any movement, even at initiating, debating investigative level, on the plight of transsexual people in this country*” (Nolan, 2010).

There were two settlements that related to transgenderism in 2007. One of the settlements concerned employment and the other was in relation to the reissuing of the stated gender on a school Leaving Certificate. The case on the issue of employment related to a male to female transsexual who lodged a complaint that she was discriminated against by her employer on the grounds of her gender disability. The complainant was advised to seek alternative employment after she informed her employer she was undergoing gender reassignment surgery during her annual leave, and will return as female. This caused undue stress resulting in exacerbation of depression that already existed due to her disorder, and a failure by her employer to

accept or allow her to work as her presented gender, had prevented the complainant from continuing with her employment. The complainant was granted legal representation through the Equality Authority and a legal submission was lodged with the Equality Tribunal on her behalf and a settlement was made before the hearing (Equality Authority, 2007, n.p.).

The Equal Status Acts of 2000 & 2004 were cited when a trans woman born as male had undergone surgery to reflect her presented gender and changed her name by deed poll, came into difficulties when she wished to change her gender and name on her school exam Certificates in order to pursue a change of career with her new identity. The complainant was denied by the State Examinations Commission to have her identity changed on her documents which she feared would have consequences if asked to present them to her employers. A complaint was lodged on the grounds of gender discrimination under The Equal Status Acts of 2000 & 2004 against the Department of Education and Science and the State Examinations Commission resulting in a review of the practice and a move to reissue school exam Certificates as required.

Employment and the Workplace

In the 2011 Guide for Successful Transgendered employment, Kelly states there are steps being made to aid recruiting within the LGBT community, particularly from large multinationals such as Coca-Cola, BP, eBay, Ernst & Young and The Marriott Hotel Group. The guide also indicates that the general public lacks a positive depiction of transgender people because of society's pressure which prohibits people in high and general professions from coming out. The 2011 ICTU report and guide on 'Being LGBT in the Workplace' states that transphobic harassment is a 'prohibited

form of discrimination that occurs when a person is subjected to hostile, offensive or intimidating behaviour by an employer or co-worker because of their gender identity and or their expression'. The report continues to give examples such as 'repeated failure to address a person by their proper name and pronoun, transphobic comments, invasive questions about medical history or genitalia, jokes, name calling, behaviour or display of pictures that insult or offend' (ICTU 2011).

Bringing Awareness

Within the workplace, it is recommended by the ICTU and TENI that awareness of gender identity and challenging of gender stereotypes will make for more understanding and an overall healthier trans-friendly workplace, regardless of whether there are transpeople employed, education and understanding lessens the lack of familiarity and understanding which often leads to discrimination. The report has published a series of guidelines recommended within EU legislation from which employers may use in broaching the subject of gender identity and acceptance within the workplace. Some of these guidelines include knowing how to handle questions about the community and to approach the TENI for information, understand that a transperson is not a spokesperson for all transpeople and they may not wish to discuss transgenderism, respect personal history, confidentiality, take care with all personal records and respect the right to privacy. Don't out a trans person unless they have given expressed consent and to consider awareness training for employees through human resources or source out via trans support agencies' (ICTU & TENI, 2011 pg.11). Although gender identity discrimination is not explicitly expressed within EU legislation, and only a limited number of trans people are protected by law, that is, men and women who intend to undergo and have undergone sexual reassignment

surgery. Many of the problems that face the trans community are based on the existing legislation that caters for binary male and female gender categories (pg.17).

Issues in the Republic of Ireland

Trans people are still not legally recognised within the Republic but are currently protected from discrimination on grounds of gender from the Employment Equality Acts of 1998 / 2008. Some trans people may seek protection under disability grounds. In May 2010, the GRAG – Gender Recognition Advisory Group was established as an interdepartmental advisory committee by the Minister for Social Protection following a high court ruling that Ireland is in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights. The group was established after the case of Dr. Lydia Foy and her challenges to have her recognised gender changed on her birth certificate.

The Irish High Court, furthermore, has ruled in Foy v. An tÁrd-Chláraitheoir, Ireland and the Attorney-General that the failure by this State to recognise the gender reassignment of the plaintiff by granting a new birth certificate reflecting the plaintiff's new gender rendered Irish law incompatible with the European Convention. In so ruling, the High Court issued a declaration of incompatibility under section 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights Act 2003 (Equality Authority 2010, n.p.).

For a person to qualify legally to change their gender, there is a requirement of the individual to have undergone surgical procedures such as gender reassignment or sterilisation. This is not practical for a number of individuals for reasons such as health, financial or an unwillingness to subject themselves to such a procedure. The Hammaberg Report (2009) expresses the view that there is no inherent need to enforce surgical measures for the classification of an individual to be eligible for changing sex. Further concerns for the rights of the community reside in effect of a person's marital status should they wish to change their sex. As same sex marriage is

only legal in five member states, a married person wishing to change their gender and have it legally recognised must first divorce their partner (p.21).

In 2011, The Gender Recognition Advisory Group released a recommended set of qualification criteria in order to legally change ones' gender in Ireland. Those criteria were; residency or Irish birth registration, minimum age requirement of 18 years old, marital and civil partnership status, a clear and settled intention to make a permanent transition, to be living in the role of their preferred gender for a minimum of 2 years and to meet the medical criteria of being diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder and medical evidence the individual has undergone gender reassignment surgery or that there is recognition in another jurisdiction.

Transgender Europe (TGEU), however, are critical of the report and stated that although there is satisfaction that Minister Burton shows commitment to 'ensure ongoing engagement and dialogue in the proposed legislation', there is a large dissatisfaction and anger within the Irish trans community within the recommendations of the GRAG report. Some recommendations that cause areas for concern include; the position on marital status and divorce should a trans person be legally recognised, the required 'Real Life Test' of living in a preferred gender for two years as this may cause unnecessary distress and anxiety for many trans people, and the medical criteria in order for the applicant to be recognised through diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder, as well as presenting medical evidence of gender reassignment surgery. 'Such criteria may discourage or exclude many trans people from seeking legal recognition'. Steering Committee member of the TGEU Cat McIlroy stated that; 'Ireland has the opportunity to lead Europe in enacting progressive gender recognition legislation, today it seems that this opportunity has been missed' (TGEU 2011).

Summary

From an overall review of the literature, it is evident that the gender binarism view in Irish society has only recently been challenged through the emergence of the transgender experience. Recent EU legislation and court cases have been significant in highlighting the importance of gender identity and recognition in Ireland. The presence of support organisations has revealed the importance of bringing gender recognition to the forefront in order for members community to participate in Irish society with minimal experiences of discrimination and misunderstanding afforded in areas such the workplace, obtaining documentation with the correct gender, healthcare and in public and social life.

AIM AND OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

From a review of current articles published by organisations which work closely in dealing with challenging legislation and strive to bring about positive changes through education, it is apparent there are many challenges faced by the transgendered community in Ireland at both institutional and individual levels. The aim of this study is to identify the current challenges which are faced by the community. The objective is to gather firsthand accounts from the members of the community on their day to day experiences of difficulties which they face and the changes which need to be accounted for in order for the community to participate equally in Irish society. This research project is based on the analysis of findings by using qualitative data-led techniques by interviewing a sample of willing participants from the transgendered community. A non-structured interview was carried out with the participants to explore their experiences and views on discrimination in Ireland. The research

question in mind was to expose what the current challenges are that face the community. The purpose for the topic chosen is due to the fact that the issues are very current and there is limited research on the topic in Ireland.

METHOD

Qualitative research was the appropriate method for gathering the data, as it is based on the subjective experiences and views of the interviewees, rather than numbers or variables of a quantitative research. Qualitative research seeks to find the how and the why by seeking meanings, understandings and definitions of discourse analysis (Grbich, 2007, pg.9). This method was more appropriate for the project as it seeks to find the meanings and understandings of the challenges faced from the sample population. With the research question in mind, the participants were asked a select few questions as they spoke about their experiences. The researcher used probes to get the appropriate data and lead back onto the general topic, and held back if there were signs of distress and moved on to another topic, taking ethical matters into consideration as it was stated in the letter of permission that the researcher would not continue if the topic was too sensitive for the participant. The research questions were semi-structured and more of a conversational approach was used overall. The researcher delved into each topic to gather the appropriate data for the project. A focus group was considered early on but it was not possible to gather all the participants together as there was reluctance and confidentiality concerns, as well as external inconveniences.

Apparatus

A Sony Microcassette-Corder M-560v and Apple iPhone 4s Voice Memo utility were used to record the interviews, then transcribed onto Microsoft word which was copied onto the NVIVO 9 programme for transcribing.

Participants

This research was based on the informed consent given by people who are among the transgendered community. Participants were approached by a number of sources. An email was sent to the organisations that operate in Dublin to request participants for the study, as well as a personal acquaintances approached, and more names given via the snow-balling method. Much of the communication in gathering the participants was done via emailing or over the phone. A total of five participants responded to the requests. Each participant was sent a brief letter outlining the researcher project; what was required of them as participants and the reassurance of confidentiality being maintained for the duration of the study. One participant was from Northern Ireland, one was from the west of Ireland and three were from Dublin. The participant's ages ranged from twenties to forties. Four participants were employed and all transitioned from male to female. Two of the participants do work for support organisations in Dublin.

Design

The primary source of data collection for this study was one to one in depth research interview. The interviews were conducted in February and March 2012 by one interviewer and lasted from twenty minutes to an hour and thirty minutes. The interview was semi-structured. Questions asked were open ended with follow up

probes. Ritchie and Lewis (2010) describe follow-up questions as “vital to ensure full exploration for the issues under investigation” (pg. 124). The research question in mind was to explore which areas are of most concern to the transgendered community in Ireland. The interviews were conducted in a manner which allowed the participants to relay their experiences as transgendered people living in Ireland and their views on what they think needs to change in order for the community to become accepted. The interviews were to generate an overall view on how the trans community is perceived in Irish society and the open ended, non structured questions facilitated in gathering the data for the project. The interviews were designed to give an overall view on how experiences had changed from the participants own perception and transitional period, and how they were perceived, as well as the difficulties they have faced with legal and medical processes from the state, and acceptance within their communities.

Procedure

Four participants were interviewed on a one to one basis in their own homes. One participant was interviewed in an organisation in Dublin which provides facilities for researchers. All participants were asked to choose where they would feel more comfortable for the interview when approached. Each participant was given a consent form to sign before the interview started and re-assured about confidentiality, secure data and pseudonyms used in the project. The interviews were semi-structured and the researcher kept a guide to basic questions, as well as a notepad to write down important points and ideas to come back to that was relevant to the research question. Each interview was then transcribed and inserted in the NVIVO 9 programme to be coded. After the coding process was finished, some themes emerged from the data which supported the research question.

Ethical Issues

As this is a research topic that involves interviewing members of an Irish minority group, there were series of ethical concerns to consider. Before commencing the project, the research proposal was run by the ethics committee in Dublin Business School to ensure the correct procedures were adhered to. Only willing participants who had given their full informed consent were approached for the research. A letter of permission was handed to each participant to read and sign. The letter stressed the importance and assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. Only pseudonyms were used and there was an active attempt to remove any identities from the research records.

The research is planned in such a way that is ethically acceptable and to minimise misleading results. Any doubts or ethical concerns were run by the ethics board by the researcher before continuing. The responsibility of dignity and welfare to all participants was ensured by the researcher. The obligation of the researcher is to protect participants from harm, humiliation, anxiety or mental distress while carrying out the research. “Research can be an ‘intrusive threat’ dealing with areas that are private, stressful or sacred” (Lee, M. R., 1999, p.4). It is the researcher’s obligation to report honestly and objectively. The data is not falsified or misrepresented and the population will not be deceived to manipulate the findings and bias is avoided. All voice data from interviews will erased after being transcribed to text and care will be ensured to not have any means of identification for the population.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed onto Microsoft Word documents then pasted into NVIVO for coding. The participant's names were not transcribed, nor were any other names or identification means that were given in interview. In cases where they were talking about other people only a single letter was used for identification of a person. From the coding, a series of themes emerged for the discussion after a thematic analysis was carried out.

RESULTS

The aim of this research was to determine what the main areas where challenges are faced by the transgender community in contemporary Irish society. From interviewing a sample population, data was gathered on how their problems are reflected. An analysis of the transcripts revealed a set of significant themes that presented themselves to support the research. Overall there were six themes which arose of the data analysed on the experiences of discrimination among the Irish transgendered community. These themes were:

- Transgenderism terminology
- Misconceptions
- Social messages
- Fears & Transphobia
- Pressures from Society
- Lack of awareness – Support & Funding

Transgenderism Terminology

The overall research is focussed on the transgendered community. The researcher asked the participants to define the term and what it means to them. It is often

described as an umbrella term that encompasses everything to do with gender identity. One participant said she has a problem with the term 'transsexualism' as it gives a sexual element to the condition and therefore gives a public misconception and in some instances, it fetishises transgenderism. Ciara, who is employed within an transgender support group said:

Ciara: I suppose the majority of the people in our organisation would be transsexual. I don't really like that term but...

Julie: What is it about the term you don't like?

Ciara: Well it mentions the word sexual. You know so I think sometimes when people hear that word they think it's about sex

Sinead stated in regards to an organisation:

Sinead: Well they prefer transsexual. I don't, I prefer transgender but that's just a matter of terminology.

Another participant, Eve said:

Eve: I mean there's a lot of talk about what terminology from the transgender community. Even the term transsexual as there is nothing sexual about this. Nothing. I don't dress because I get off on it. I dress in women's clothes for any reason why people dress in women's clothes. I seriously do not get off on this, my god.

Misconceptions

From these interviews, it was revealed straight away that there are already misconceptions due to the perception of the terminology used to describe the community. The greatest theme to arise from the data is misconceptions. This will be discussed further with the other themes that arose from the analysis. The misconceptions are so prevalent in Irish society, that even members of the trans community, from early on, don't even know what they are to identify with. Eve said she only realised when she went to meet other transpeople, that she herself was

actually identifying with women more, and not just a man who likes to wear women's clothes:

Eve: I met with other transvestites and people who transitioned already and started learning very quickly with the various types of ways that people expressed themselves and realised I actually identified more with people who transitioned than cross dressers. That hit me like a train. and people were like 'oh so you want to be a woman'? I said no I fucking don't, I fucking don't, god no. I don't want this, it was absolutely shocking and a part of it was, how could I have been so wrong about myself for so long?

There was fear that that is what she was. She said people assumed she wants to be transgender. People assume that that is what they want, they enjoy being transgender and it is done out of want, not need. She felt no one understands how difficult it is to realise this:

Eve: Because being trans has to be the most difficult things to be. Quite apart from the fact of the different social differences between men and women and how they are treated, for me being a woman means being trans. Put that on top of misogyny and sexual discrimination. I don't know any trans person who says 'oh I really want to be a woman' It's like this is who I am, this is what I need to do in order to survive to be healthy. Yes it's not so much that I want to do these things, it's that I need them. That need in people can be so strong that it can come across as a want. But it is actually need, it's not a want.

Gender Identity Disorder (GID) is clinical condition, rather than a psychological condition. Although it still requires a medical diagnosis in order to be recognised legally. This led to discovering the larger scale of the problems faced by the community that affects how they live and contributes majorly toward their discrimination.

Julie: When you were diagnosed with GID, what did you think about having it being a medical diagnosis?

Eve: I had to change my passport and in order to do this I had to get a medical diagnosis. There are no other citizens of this state who have to be diagnosed before receiving a passport. That is so very wrong.

Eve said however, there is recognition that people who present themselves as trans, are given the benefit of the doubt by medical professionals that they do not have a psychiatric condition:

Eve: Yes, there are some people who think they have a psychiatric condition but this is nothing compared to the amount of transgender people. It's nothing. Thankfully the psychiatric profession seems to be going of the direction of 'it's not that we are going to diagnose them with a mental condition, what we are going to rule out is the opposite of a mental condition. I think that's fair enough. As I say the vast vast majority of people who present with this are genuinely trans.

Sinead said in relation to GID:

Sinead: Well the bulk of people feel that we shouldn't be requiring the diagnosis.

Misrepresentation and public misconceptions of transgenderism are a very common theme that runs through the research. One participant, Eve, said there was a standard narrative when it comes to transgenderism:

Eve: They need to get rid of this ridiculous standard narrative they have about trans people. Yes they have received that narrative through interviews with trans people but the thing about it is that those trans people, a lot of them have to say a particular set of things in order to satisfy the medical profession. Because the profession has come along in leaps and bounds, the medical profession has accepted that narrative isn't quite true, they still have a way to go”.

Julie: *What is that standard narrative?*

Eve: The standard narrative would be you know of the guy who has been dressing in his mothers clothes since age three and who is very tragic who has always known there are trans, attracted to men, looks hideous, usually is part of the narrative, is very flamboyant.

This standard narrative is used in order to satisfy the medical profession, but it is one that wider society also generally accepts, that transpeople are mostly ‘men who like to wear women’s clothes.’

Sarah: *I happened to meet some transgendered people and it was when I met them I thought oh my god, they are fabulous these girls and they looked nothing like my experience with transgendered people at all, on television they always looked different.*

Social Messages

Much of the narrative and misconception comes from the social messages that are represented in the media.

Eve: *I think the media needs to stop sensationalising transgender. That needs to stop. They need to stop focussing on what's between our legs. I mean that is sick. Focussing on what is between anyone's legs is sick. It speaks of serious problems with editors and reporters.*

Another participant Jennifer also had a lot to say on the media:

Julie: *what are the biggest obstacles facing the transgender community at the moment?*

Jennifer: *I think general acceptance and portrayals in media. the media can be really savage and influence people negatively. I think there would be a lot more acceptance of trans people if there were better media representation*

Julie: *How are the trans community misrepresented?*

Jennifer: *trans people are often depicted horribly, as the butts of jokes in comedy shows, or as ridiculous. sometimes you'll have a show where they discuss trans issues but never hear from a trans person, it's always filtered through what non-trans people think about the motivations trans people have to transition.*

The social messages contribute to perception of the transgender community. One of the biggest tools for this is the media. Recently, there was an issue with a Paddy Power ad that was broadcast on TV3 that depicted trans people in a mocking way on Ladies Day at the races. One participant called the ad dangerous. Someone could have taken their life over it. That is how serious the issue is for people who can't come out.

Eve: *My god, that ad possibly killed somebody. You know, if not more than one person. It was unbelievably dangerous. The trans community made a mistake when we said it was offensive, we should have said it was dangerous. It probably killed somebody. Someone who was in the closet thinking oh I can't come out, I can't be me. And they see that and think oh my god I can't even go to race meetings.*

Similarly, another participant Sinead had the same view, that ads like these are dangerous;

Sinead: *And what the Paddy Power thing, I mean I had this when I was in a club last night the girl who runs the club, she stood up and said "ah it was a bit of fun". I said "no it wasn't a bit of fun". I said "if you get a kid who's struggling with their gender living in the other side of Tullamore in a small village or whatever and they see that, they're not going to come out and get help. They're going to struggle on with it. They're not going to talk to anybody about it".*

Messages like these in the media indicate it is ok to make fun of transpeople. To perpetuate stereotypes reduces members to feel they are the subject of mock and ridicule. Another participant, Sarah stated that during her transition she was on the receiving end of this sort of behaviour:

Sarah: *when I did start changing and I became like, a clown like for comedy person. I had several years of looking in between and I got jeered on for that.*

Fears and Transphobia

Stereotyping is a typical aspect to a phobia. Transphobia is experienced by the community, although one of the participants says it is not a huge problem in Ireland, it does exist:

Julie: *Is transphobia a big problem in this country?*

Jennifer: *I think less so than other countries, I mean you've not heard of anyone in Ireland being killed for being trans, but it still exists. I've had abuse roared at me from moving cars, bashed into as someone passed me on the path, had someone follow me out of a pub to shout stuff at me, so it is there.*

However another participant Ciara, who works in support groups says it does go on, and there is a lot of it:

Julie: And would you say there's a lot of transphobia in Ireland?

Ciara: Yeah. A lot of it doesn't go reported I mean there's so many, I mean verbal abuse would be extremely high. Again there's no statistics because there's no research specifically on transgender people

The fear of being harassed in public is one of many other fears that the community experience as well as issues faced in the workplace and gaining employment.

Julie: Is there a lot of fear the community, like how often would transpeople get hassled?

Jennifer: there's certainly a lot of justifiable fear, yeah. I don't think anyone trans hasn't met with some hassle, or hostility.

Jennifer: but like, there's a lot of general fears that I would have that I think a lot of other trans people would have, like fear of being accosted while using a public bathroom and public facilities can be dangerous for trans people in general, or being refused medical treatment for being trans or generally just being assaulted on the street.

Another is fear of not getting employment. Eve stated:

Eve: The biggest fear that any transgender person has is the fear of being able to make a living. If you lose friends you make more, if you lose your family it hurts like hell but you can get over it. But if you can't make a living, you're fucked.

There were pressures experienced by a participant who transitioned in the workplace.

Her manager was not sympathetic or aware. He requested she see clients as a male.

This brought inadvertent stresses to her job and she eventually had to leave:

Sinead: *And then I would have to go out and see clients in male mode, deal with them over the phone in male mode but I could come into the office dressed as Jennifer. Now that was extremely difficult and people don't realise this because your whole demeanour, your whole mannerisms are totally different when you change from a male persona to a female persona. Totally different, your whole, your voice has to change; your body language has to change. That was the most difficult to change. That was the most difficult bit. The grief that I got right on through and I just said "I'm going to have to leave. I can't take the stress any longer."*

Pressures from Society

The next theme that ties in was societal pressures. With analysis of the data, this theme arose from some of the participants. The pressure to conform to gender stereotypes in order to be accepted with their new gender identity.

Eve: *One of my friends is talking about how she is getting pressured into getting surgery. She was like 'I am comfortable with who I am at the moment, yeah surgery probably is down the line but right now I am comfortable'. I also felt pressured into getting surgery, less from the medical profession but more so from society.*

She went on to say;

Eve: *I felt society wouldn't accept me as female unless I had surgery. I was thinking, to what extent am I making these changes to my body for me, and to what extent am I making these changes for everybody else.*

Jennifer felt there was more pressure from public attitudes on how to behave to a certain standard with regards to gender:

Jennifer: *like, even some people who are trying to be helpful can be really overbearing with it, and say "oh you shouldn't wear that if you want to be a man/woman" or you shouldn't sit like that, you should do this, you should do that..... it seems like a lot of people hold transgender people to higher standards of masculinity/femininity*

Julie: *Is there pressure to get surgery in order to feel accepted too?*

Jennifer: *there's more like policing trans people's behaviour and mannerisms to fit in, rather than surgery.*

Julie: *Policing by the trans community?*

Jennifer: *No, policing by non-trans people.*

Some other concerns highlighted were issues with the GRAG report and its failure to address the problem of transitioning within a marriage and being forced to divorce in order to do so:

Sinead: Under the Constitution and the protection of marriage it doesn't make sense to me they're now going to force people to divorce.

Eve: I am fearful that a bad gender recognition act will be brought in. I have a bad feeling about the GRAG report...

The whole gender recognition thing that says if you are married you have to get divorced. That is sick...the people who suffer the most will be children. And once again the children of Ireland are made pay because the adults find it too difficult to do the right thing.

Lack of Awareness – Support and Funding

The final theme is support and funding. From talking to two of the participants in the support services, they repeatedly stressed the importance of funding the services. The importance of organisations is to show there is a voice within the trans community. Recognition that there is a community and people that are able to articulate and fight for the needs of transpeople. To right the misconceptual wrongs.

Ciara highlighted why the services are needed for the community. It all boils down to the attitude that the ads portraying stereotypes are ok. This allows the public to think it is acceptable to approach transpeople in whatever way they like;

Sinead: People seem quite comfortable thinking they can step over your boundaries and ask whatever. Ah, you're being treated, it's the Paddy Power sort of advert thing. You're being treated like an object. You're not being treated as a human being. You're being objectivised and treated like an object, like a dog that you can, you know, that you can treat anyway you want and nobody answers back.

However there was a strong backlash over the ad from transgender support groups.

The lobbying was necessary in order to have the ad pulled and send out a strong social

message that is unacceptable to make cheap digs at the community. The organisations have power behind them to make their voices heard. This is only made possible through funding and awareness.

Ciara: We do an awful lot of media work. I mean a few years ago there would have been no one to fight Paddy Power but we fought them and they pulled the ad.

Ciara, a prominent member in an organisation discussed how much work they do with the community, and the wider community. Offering support to families affected by the issues that transgenderism brings and giving advice on how to deal with coming out. A huge issue that affects the community, is suicide. Which is at 26% among the community. Ciara said that even still there is a reluctance for funding in this country from organisations and from the state;

Ciara: Ironically I was in touch with the National Office of Suicide Prevention last week and they were very reluctant to give us any money and seeing that the suicide rate has been researched is twenty-six percent of people have attempted suicide in our community so we would be certainly one of the highest if not the highest suicide attempters in this country and the reason why they said they won't fund us is because they're never funded us before. So if you're not on the ladder you're not getting on the ladder.

Much of the funding comes from overseas. From the United States. Without it, there would clearly be a lot more suffering and a less visible community to correct the wrongs that have been created over the years. From analysing the data and the themes that arise, the most prevalent is public misconception and negative social messages generated by the media that reinforces barriers for the Irish transgendered community.

DISCUSSION

From researching the data gathered from the interviews and carrying out a thematic analysis, the results of the findings showed evidence to support the research of discrimination among the Irish transgendered community. The research question in mind was to focus on exposing the what challenges are that they face. The main challenges faced by the community stem from elements that have been researched through the review of the literature. The aim of the study was to triangulate the project with existing literature reviewed and match the research question with the accounts of the participants by analysing the themes that arose from each interview. The researcher wishes to acknowledge the limitations on size for the interviews as it was difficult to get a large sample population for this study. The intimate and in-depth nature of the interviews however, meant there was a rich set of data obtained from each of the participants. From each interview, the recurring themes could be generalised to the wider population of the transgendered community.

The researcher had sets of topics in mind to ask the participants about in the interview. These revolved around medical care, legal and equality issues and social issues. These are the general findings from each of the headings, from which the themes emerged from:

Medical Care

The participants agreed that although the medical profession in Ireland give priority to transgenderism being a physiological condition over a psychological condition, there is still a long way to go in regards providing a comprehensible service to the community. However the medical profession although required to give a psychiatric evaluation before proceeding with treatment, assume the majority of people who

present themselves as trans do not have a psychological condition, but a physiological one.

Legal and Equality Issues

On the legal front, the participants agreed that recognition, although not as bad in Ireland as it is in other countries, still has issues that need to be addressed. This ties in with the legal status of same sex marriage. The concerns were having to divorce in order to change gender. Also to be diagnosed with a medical condition in order to have recognition. One participant, Eve said ‘No other community has to have a medical diagnosis in order to get a passport’ There were further concerns over the GRAG report that is currently going through a process of being published and how it effects the family unit.

Social Issues

At the beginning of the interview, a question was asked about what is transgender. From reviewing the data, there were issues with the terminologies used such as transsexual. It immediately places sexuality into the forefront, and as the 2011 ICTU paper reiterates ‘gender identity is not sexual identity’ one of the participants stated that it fetishises the condition and leads to public perception that there is a sexual element to transgenderism, as a whole. The wider issues stemmed from the view of heteronormative function which appears to be still a prevalent attitude in Irish society. This makes it more difficult to accept a diversity of gender roles outside the perceived binary norms. Kimmel (2008) stated that gender roles constraints impose many boundaries on expected gender behaviour. This was evident through the interviews. The societal attitudes were the most comprehensible of all the topics discussed. The

analysis of the data recovered the most themes when elements of this aspect were examined. Through the interviewing techniques used, there was a focus on how the participants believed they were perceived in society. All participants agreed it that misconceptions are the biggest barriers that face the trans community and contributes toward their discrimination in a significant way. On analysis of the data, the theme of Social Messages revealed how the transgendered community are often misrepresented through various means, the media being the greatest influence.

The media perpetuates negative stereotypes of the community and often transgendered people are depicted as ‘men who like to wear their mother’s dresses’ as one participant describes, this is the standard narrative when discussing transgenderism. Between fetishisation and misrepresentation for comedic purposes, this leads to objectification. Many of the participants felt that they were objects to be laughed at, harassed, there were no boundaries when out socialising in regards to strangers asking questions such as what state their genitals were in. Many people’s exposure to transgendered people are in the form of drag queens in the entertainment arena, and the Ladyboys of Thailand shows, as discussed in the literature review. The entertainment element of these shows are often components in gay subculture which is a possibility for the sexualisation and question of sexual identity with regards to gender identity.

Fears

The next theme that emerged was fear. Misconceptions pave the way to the feelings of fear and insecurity. One of the biggest fears were the issues surrounding barriers to employment. Out of the five participants interviewed, only one was currently unemployed but three had experienced issues while transitioning. They felt the

unacceptance led to there being issues with maintaining or gaining employment and opportunities for promotion. Three participants spoke about their fears of not gaining employment after their transition. This was a large issue for them. They feel that they could do their work in areas like IT as it was more ‘behind the scenes’ not in roles where they are physically dealing with the public daily. Except for those employed with the support services. The recent court cases as discussed in the literature review highlighted some of the ongoing workplace discriminatory problems that are being faced. Further fears are within the wider community and the subject of transphobism. All participants experienced harassment while out socialising. Some spoke of their friends being followed and violently assaulted. The 2009 TENI report highlights the issues with transphobism and stated that the issues with marginalisation come from unequal legislation and diminished rights as Irish citizens. The report also finds that there is a large misunderstanding about transgenderism which can feed into these experiences of transphobism and discrimination.

Education and Funding

The final theme was education and funding. The importance of representing the community in the correct way was constantly brought up and ties in with the whole understanding of reasons for their discrimination. Two of the participants interviewed represented organisations which endeavour to educate the wider population about transgenderism and the issues that members from the community face. The organisations have only been in existence for a small number of years but have done a lot of work especially with regard to the media and lobbying to have ads pulled that they deem as ‘dangerous’ as it can give the wrong messages to people struggling with their gender identities, particularly adolescents who are dealing with the stresses of

rapid biological and hormonal changes. It was stated in an interview that a over a quarter of the trans population have attempted suicide but there are very few provisions for specific services to target this issue, due to lack of research and government funding.

Problems Encountered with the Research

While compiling the research, it was decided a focus group would be the most effective way to gather the data. After composing the letter of permission and seeking participants to take part, it was found not possible to do this as it was difficult to get all the participants together and there was some apprehension amongst some of them due to anonymity issues. It was decided that one to one interviews would be best, however there were two participants interviewed together as one was not out yet and was reserved in taking part. Unfortunately the tape recorder worked only intermittently for this interview and there was little data gathered. There was enough data to use for the research.

Upon reflecting this research, there should have been more attention paid to how the community feel about being classed in LGBT bracket. This seems to feed into the perception that transgenderism has more of a sexuality element to it than a gender identity issue. Much of the literature reviewed were reports that were funded by LGBT organisations. From discussing the term transgender, the results revealed that a number of the community disliked there being a sexual element to one of the terms and this plays a large role into feeding into the misconceptions of the wider society.

CONCLUSION

The research question proposes that there are many challenges faced by the community and they lay in Irish society. Upon analysing the data and existing literature, it was discovered this is the case. Many of the issues faced by the community are due to negative social messages which are focussed on by the media. Stereotypes of transgenderism only go on to further damage members of the community when trying to function and interact in everyday life. As a consequence, there are a multitude of barriers in which they face in areas such as state recognition, employment, mental health and general acceptance.

It is hoped there will be further research in the area of transgender misconceptions in Ireland with attention to figures which can support the claims of discrimination and further challenges such as depression and suicide. One distinct issue that was highlighted was a figure for suicide, the participant claimed it was 26% in the community. She said the area was under researched and underfunded so she could not give a definite answer. This claim reveals there is a large issue that has been overlooked when researching the community that needs to be addressed with further research.

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APPENDIX

Letter of Permission

Julie Murphy
Dublin Business School
13/14 Aungier Street
Dublin 2

March 28th 2012

Dear Sir / Madame,

I am final year Social Science student studying in Dublin Business School.

I am writing a thesis based on the experiences of discrimination within the Irish Transgendered community.

The aim of the study is to gather data on the areas that affect the community on a day to day basis, particularly around the issues of gaining employment.

To gather the data, I wish to use a non-structured one to one interview method in which the participant may talk about their experiences and views.

To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used for each participant on written material. The recordings will be kept in secure storage in which only myself has access to, it will be transcribed into text then erased upon graduation.

To progress with the interview, I wish to obtain your informed consent that you are willing to participate with the study.

Again it is important that I stress you can terminate your involvement at any time.

If you would like further information, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Julie Murphy

Email: 1291866@Mydbs.ie

Ph: 086 265 3062