

Roshni Narendran (Orcid ID: 0000-0002-9707-5863)
James Reveley (Orcid ID: 0000-0002-3004-7630)
Shamika Almeida (Orcid ID: 0000-0002-0037-5182)

Title: Countering transphobic stigma: Identity work by self-employed Keralan transpeople

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Authors:

Roshni Narendran, PhD (Corresponding Author)

Tasmanian School of Business & Economics
University of Tasmania
Private Bag 84, Hobart TAS 7001
Australia.
Email: roshni.narendran@utas.edu.au
Tel: +613 6226 5540

Biography:

Roshni Narendran works as a Lecturer in the School of Business and Economics at the University of Tasmania, Australia. Previously she worked in an autonomous government body that focused on restructuring public sector units. She received her doctorate from the University of Newcastle. She is interested in understanding the influence of government interventions on women business owners. Recently she began working on a research project to understand the effects of financial literacy on firm performance.

James Reveley, PhD

School of Management and Marketing
Faculty of Business and Law
University of Wollongong, NSW 2522
Australia.
Email: jreveley@uow.edu.au
Tel: +612 4221 4626

Biography:

James Reveley is an Associate Professor of Management in the Faculty of Business and Law at the University of Wollongong. His research interests include identity work by the disabled, banker misconduct, scapegoating and social stigma, and the social construction of resilience. His work has been published in a range of international journals including *Human Relations*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization*, *Enterprise and Society*, *Journal of Management History*, and *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. He is currently engaged in research concerning the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on how educational organizations manage risk.

Shamika Almeida, PhD

School of Management and Marketing
Faculty of Business and Law

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University of Wollongong, NSW 2522
Australia.
Email: shamika@uow.edu.au
Tel: +612 4221 5688

Biography:

Shamika Almeida is a Senior Lecturer in Management in the Faculty of Business and Law at the University of Wollongong. Prior to her entry into academia, Shamika worked for more than a decade in the corporate sector in FMCG, banking, apparel, travel and recruitment consulting industries. Her real-life corporate experiences of discrimination in the workplace motivates her to seek answers to why employers may be hesitant to recruit skilled migrants. Shamika is passionate about giving voice to the socially disadvantaged and using training and education as mechanisms to create awareness regarding exclusionary behaviour in the workplace. Her research has been published in the *International Journal of Human Resources*, *International Migration*, and the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Human Resources*.

Countering transphobic stigma: Identity work by self-employed Keralan transpeople

Abstract

Transpeople in India forge identities at the confluence of contradictory social forces. Interviews conducted in the state of Kerala suggest that the experience of transphobic stigma results in **self-employed** transpeople being abjectified. Social abjection, in turn, triggers their identity work within liminal social spaces located between the everyday lifeworld and postcolonial legal institutions. Through this work, the participants in this study navigated the contradictions between two identity-constituting external structures: culture and law. Culture is a source of identity threat but it also supplies a socially legitimated identity template – the *hijra* – used in the vital self-formative work of mirroring and witnessing. Similarly, trans-supportive social policies and laws provide institutional scaffolding for identities. Yet, despite the agential nature of the participants' identity work, the inherent limitations of the law and the vulnerability of embodiment renders them susceptible to the ongoing threat posed by transphobia emanating from ambient cultural norms.

Keywords

abjection, transphobia, India, identity work, liminality, stigma, transpeople

1. INTRODUCTION

Transphobic stigma is known to make it difficult for transpeople to establish stable identities (Howansky et al., 2019). Over the last twenty years, however, the erosion of gender boundaries – in both theory and practice – has given members of trans communities recourse to an array of identity-bolstering resources. For those in the Global South, LBGT activism and Westernizing influences have increasingly made available a range of cosmopolitan sexual and gender identity models (Milanović, 2017). Yet this social transformation has been accompanied by the persistence of transphobic prejudice grounded in deep-seated cultural assumptions about the socially appropriate configuration of bodies (Salamon, 2010). Trans embodiment threatens to break the slender social thread that connects gender – as a social construct – to nature through the medium of bivalent sex differences which entrench a ‘naturalized binary’ (Butler, 2015: 43). Because of this, transpeople still experience hatred, discrimination and stigmatization in both Western and non-Western settings (Ciocca et al., 2020).

This study focuses on transphobic stigma-induced identity work. The term identity work refers to a person’s attempts to keep their self-understandings internally and externally coherent in the face of identity threats (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Researchers have addressed the role of stigma in prompting identity work, and the specifically gendered nature of this work, in a variety of organizations (Mavin & Grandy, 2013; Rajan-Rankin, 2018). Recently, however, there has been a call for organizational scholars to pay attention to how ‘identity dynamics are inserted in broader processes of worldmaking’ (Patriotta, 2020, p. 215). One way is by widening the scope of identity work research to include experiences of transphobic stigma in countries in the Global South with histories of colonial oppression (Camminga, 2018). Focusing on identity work by stigmatized transpeople in India is a response to this imperative.

There are two reasons for concentrating on the self-employed. Firstly, they regularly interact with members of the general public and thus encounter transphobic attitudes and behaviour on a daily basis. Secondly, they lack access to the identity materials and sensemaking resources that are available to stigmatized individuals who are employed in large organizations (Kreiner & Mihelcic, 2020). By investigating how transpeople respond to transphobic stigma in the absence of identity resources supplied by organizations, but in the presence of the contradictory social forces found in postcolonial settings, the purpose here is to move beyond the traditional concerns of organizationally situated identity work research (Brown, 2015).

Gender-based social contradictions abound on the subcontinent. On the one hand, India houses many distinctive and longstanding gender non-conforming communities (Michelraj, 2015). Prominent amongst these are the *hijra* who worship Bahuchara Mata, a Hindu Mother Goddess (Nanda, 1990). India is also a site of intense transactivism, which has led to a flourishing of vibrant trans-identities (Singh et al, 2013; Dutta & Roy, 2014). On the other hand, transpeople experience high rates of poverty, social rejection, and discrimination (Badgett, 2014). Being subjected to transphobic prejudice and violence often commences in their youth (Elischberger et al., 2018). The opportunities for trans women in particular to earn a living are limited, so many engage in sex work, which increases their susceptibility to HIV and thus to intersectional stigma (Ganju & Saggurti, 2017). In an effort to address these social problems, a watershed decision by India's Supreme Court in 2014 legally recognized transpeople (Agoramoorthy & Hsu, 2015). Other legislative initiatives – notably the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 – mark an attempt to combat transphobic stigma (Gichki, 2020).

Rights-based legislation is, however, patchy and uneven. In the process of constructing a generic, Westernized bearer of transgender rights, the identities of members of

some groups receive greater legal recognition than others (Loh, 2018). Because of this, many transpeople are now uneasily positioned between the contradictory affordances of culture and law. How do self-employed transpeople in India construct identities at the confluence of the disparate sources of enablement and constraint supplied by these external structures? What are the specific manifestations of the culturally-derived transphobic stigma they face? What identity resources and identity work techniques do they employ in response? How successful are they at counteracting transphobic stigma?

This study looks to Kerala for answers to these questions because this populous southwestern state represents, in microcosm, a heady amalgam of the contradictory social forces found more widely in the Indian subcontinent (Mokkil, 2019). Despite the rise of a locally active LGBT movement from the 1980s onwards, the public expression of diverse gender and sexual identities in Kerala has been hampered by rising intolerance and stringent ‘moral policing’ (Tharayil, 2014, p. 78). In response, the state government enacted a trans-supportive social policy in 2015 (Department of Social Justice, 2015). The present study examines the participants’ identity work responses to their own past and present experiences of culturally-derived transphobic stigma within the context of the comparatively recent rights-based policies and laws designed to ameliorate this stigma.

We focus on transpeople who identify as trans women, rather than including participants who identify as trans men, precisely because the lived experience of discrimination suffered by these groups in India differs (Bahadur & Kumar, 2016). Having originally had their identities ‘rigidly designated’ (Hughes, 2006, p. 210) by perinatally-given masculine names, the participants all have a felt sense of womanhood and have renamed themselves accordingly. Many describe themselves using the English word ‘transgender’. Yet it is important not to universalize or reify these gender categories. Subcontinental scholars and activists alike argue that the term ‘transgender’ is a Western

social construct that both oversimplifies the complexities of traditional and emerging gender norm-defying communities in India and functions as an instrument of state-based identity regulation (Dutta & Roy, 2014; Loh, 2018). The contested nature of this term is why, following a convention derived from Loh (2018), the participants are referred to here as transpeople. Examining how they practically use Westernized, legalistic codifications of ‘transgender’ as an identity resource is precisely one point of this study.

The text is structured as follows. The next section provides a philosophico-conceptual foundation for the analysis. The third section deals with methods. In the fourth section the participants’ stigma experiences are explored, together with the identity work strategies they employed in response. The fifth section discusses key findings and identifies directions for future research. This is followed by some concluding remarks.

2. LITERATURE ON DECOLONIALITY, LIMINALITY AND IDENTITY WORK

Arguably, rights-based legal initiatives mean that Keralan transpeople’s stigma experiences are juxtaposed with ‘new possibilities for subjectivity’ (Boellstorff, 2011, p. 288). To accommodate structure and agency in the realization of these possibilities, this section combines a phenomenologically-inflected strain of decolonial theory **with insights into identity work and liminality drawn from qualitative management research**. The purpose is grasp how embodiment and institutions intersect in liminal social spaces where identities are forged. We conceptualize these as contingent sites where transphobic stigma-induced identity work occurs at the crux of contradictions between the identity-constituting institutions of culture and law.

Decolonial theory arose in the late 1990s out of debates between two sets of scholars: in the first place, proponents of French post-structuralism – whose reference points include the writings of Bhabha (1994) and Spivak (1999) – and, in the second place, Latin American

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scholars with intellectual roots in the sociology of underdevelopment (Bhambra, 2014). By seeking to move beyond the literary and culturalist leanings of classic postcolonial theory, decolonial theorists' aim to strike a better balance between cultural institutions and economic or legal institutions in analyses of the 'colonial power matrix' (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 218). To subscribe to a decolonial approach is to be committed to liberatory social practice in relation to all legacies of colonialism – from the legal-institutional to the subjective planes (Slabodsky, 2014; Singh, 2018). Accordingly, this study henceforth uses the term 'postcolonial' not to refer to theory as such, but rather to an oppressive set of institutional arrangements – spanning the domains of law, politics and culture – found in countries such as India that have a deep-seated colonial heritage (Mignolo, 2011). Decoloniality, as it is used here, denotes an epistemic stance that challenges Western conceptions of personhood that underlie postcolonial socio-cultural and legal institutions and shape the social context in which the stigmatized seek to establish identities.

To make the link between institutions and the subject, we follow the lead of decolonial authors who tap into the phenomenological philosophical tradition's insights (Mignolo, 2018; Zaytoun, 2019). Prime among these is the anti-Kantian notion that the body is the primary means of practical engagement with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). The phenomenological turn within the decolonial literature dovetails with philosophically inflected trans studies that employ 'critical phenomenology' (Salamon, 2018; Das Janssen, 2017). Most relevantly for this study's purposes, these perspectives direct attention to embodied subjectivity – and, by implication, the lifeworld of the stigmatizable trans person.

From these currents of thought we draw two ideas. The first concerns the centrality of embodiment and the institutional legacy of colonialism to transphobic stigma experiences. The salient point for the topic at hand is that the regulation of gender and sexuality under British colonial rule in India hardened attitudes towards embodied gender transgressive

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identities, since it deemed them anomalous and illegal (Hinchy, 2019). By the same token, the comparatively recent development of ‘rights-subjectivities’ is a Westernizing project that overlooks how colonialism reinforced the culturally sedimented mistreatment of marginalized groups in the Global South (Balagopalan, 2019). Legal institutions are one-part empowering and one-part disempowering. Within India, legally encoding the term ‘transgender’ goes some way towards satisfying rights-claims, but it also produces a ratiocinating legal category that shoehorns transgressive bodies and identities (Dutta & Roy, 2014). Indeed, as Raghavan (2017) argues, stigma-targeting legal reforms in India attempt to reconstruct diversely embodied transpeople as abstractly universalized and disembodied rights-bearing subjects. Simply put, legal rights discourse and institutions pay insufficient attention to their situated and embodied particularity.

The second broad idea that this study draws from decolonial thought is that embodied subjects construct identities in ‘border space’ (Mignolo, 2007, p. 497). The concept of the ‘borderland’ refers to a liminal space – or ‘limen’ – where contradictions are rife (DiPietro et al., 2019, p. 18). Since cultural norms are both enabling and constraining (Swidler, 1986), one source of liminality and contradiction is within culture. Indeed, transpeople in India and the South Asian diaspora confront cultural contradictions as they encounter culturally-derived stigma and forge identities in a limen (Roshanravan, 2019). **As Medina (2020, p. 216) insightfully observes,** the limen is ‘a place of dislocation or disorientation’, but it can also be a liberatory space where personal ‘rebirth and growth’ is possible.

Support for the preceding proposition is available in the management literature on liminality, which draws attention to how liminal spaces are challenging and unsettling but also provide opportunities for self-definition (Frenkel, 2008; Prasad, 2014). The decolonial theorists’ conception of liminality accords with the open-endedness of this phenomenon noted by management scholars across a range of

domains (Söderlund and Borg, 2018). In particular, the decolonial notion of liminal spaces as being replete with ‘creative possibilities’ (Medina, 2020, p. 216) is substantiated by management studies that stress the agential side of liminality in identity work (Beech, 2011; Daskalaki & Simosi, 2018; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2020). Our study uses the concept of abjection to link identity work within liminal social spaces, which management researchers and decolonial theorists acknowledge as being double-edged, to how Keralan transpeople respond to the identity threats posed by enacted transphobic stigma.

As an exteriorized phenomenon, this culturally-derived stigma targets bodily difference and manifests in physical violence, victimization by authorities, family rejection and hateful speech acts, as well as exclusion from employment. To experience transphobic stigma is to be abjected – that is, to be dehumanized and socially positioned as ‘the Other’ (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2014). In phenomenological terms, this is one way that the ‘pre-interpreted world’ – or the indistinct background of social life – is rendered unintelligible and threatened identities emerge in the foreground (Patriotta, 2020). For transpeople in Kerala, the effects of being abjected in the lifeworld sink deeply within the self since transphobic stigma supervenes upon dominant cultural conventions surrounding the exact bodily differences that, for many, are phenomenologically self-defining.

Yet, to be abjected is not merely to be an abjectly constituted subject, but rather to have live options for agential self-constitution (Tyler, 2013). Management scholars who show the stigmatized have empowering identity work response options reinforce this point (Toyoki & Brown, 2014; Doldor & Atewologun, 2020). Abjection denotes a ‘liminal space where the subject experiences a crisis of meaning in which transformation is possible’ (Phillips, 2014, p. 20). In this sense, abjection can itself be conceptualized as a liminal phenomenon. As noted, the fact that the cultural and legal institutional milieu in India is replete with

contradictions – internal to culture but also between culture and law – means that identity work in the limen is delicately poised, and sometimes caught, between these sources of enablement and constraint. As will be demonstrated, Keralan self-employed transpeople’s transphobic stigma-induced identity work has this feature.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Stance

The methodological corollary of the decolonial-theoretic stance we adopt is empathetic understanding, but tempered by awareness that privileged academics located in the Global North run the ever-present risk of slipping into symbolic acts of ‘benevolent violence’ towards oppressed people in the Global South (DiPietro, 2019, p. 198). With this caveat in mind we disclose that our lead author, who is originally from Kerala, has both firsthand knowledge of everyday life and culture this region, and a strong positive affective disposition towards the participants. Still, we do not claim epistemic privilege. In an effort to understand the participants’ everyday life experiences, and to avoid reifying the conceptual categories we use to analyze these experiences, we sought to shed our ‘sedimented interpretations’ (Salamon, 2018, p. 16).

Insofar as transphobic stigma is inscribed in the corporeal (Behnke, 2010), we felt the need to be physically co-present with the participants whose phenomenal stigma experiences we seek to understand. Because of this, the lead author – who is fluent in the regional dialect (Malayalam) – travelled to Kerala to undertake the fieldwork in person. Our approach here is informed by the notion of ‘radical openness’ (Rhodes & Carlsen, 2018). Rather than using research assistants recruited locally, we wanted to be present in a double-sense – present with them, and present (and thus open) to them. By engaging in dialogue, moreover, we wanted to be taught by them. Hence on the issue of whether, in making the decision to identify as

women, the participants are acquiescing to India's pervasive binaristic gender norms (Joy et al., 2015), this study is agnostic. We neither judge nor claim to know the participants in a strong doxastic sense; all knowledge resulting from the research process is a co-creation.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

Access was vouchsafed by Keralan Social Justice Department officials, one of whom advised against using Malayalam synonyms for 'transgender' (such as 'bhinna lingam' and 'napumsaka') because they are offensive to local transpeople. Potential participants were provided with the research project's details through a WhatsApp message in Malayalam. The snowball technique was then used as initial respondents provided other contacts. This resulted in 28 participants in total, all of whom were trans women and self-employed – but whose educational backgrounds and field of business endeavour varied (see Table 1). Our focus is primarily on urban settings. The participants' location determined the cities – Trivandrum, Ernakulam, Thrissur, Kozhikode and Kannur – where the research was conducted.

Open-ended interviews are how we learned about the participants' stigma experiences. Throughout the interview process the fear of masculinism and mistreatment was palpable. For example, one participant said to a potential contact, 'Do not worry, I am sending a woman, not a man'. Deeply personal and traumatic life events were frequently disclosed by participants, which risked revivifying their physical and emotional trauma (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Four strategies were adopted to counteract this risk. First, using a dialogical approach, the course of the interview was guided by the participants. To avoid obtruding upon the responses of participants, probing questions were only asked if it was essential to get a better understanding of something they said. Second, the interviewer was careful to provide culturally appropriate – genuine rather than confected – sympathetic

gestures and responses within the interview situation. Third, we are guided by the idea that when past experiences of trauma are brought to reflective consciousness, such as when they are intimated in an interview, ‘the traumatic event becomes drained of some of its toxicity’ (Klempner, 2000, p. 72). Finally, each participant was given multiple opportunities to terminate the interview.

All interviews were conducted in Malayalam, digitally recorded, and transcribed by a translator. The transcriptions were then cross-checked by our first author to ensure their accuracy. The primary data analysis first involved us reading the interview transcripts in fine-grained detail. We then used NVivo 12 to identify emerging themes and to generate first-level codes, in an iterative process we each contributed to. This process enabled us to compare the emerging first-order codes, to conceptually cluster codes that are related, and to aggregate these into higher-level categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The NVivo-based data analysis suggests that the participants went through broadly similar experiences of social rejection and discrimination through exteriorized acts, some of which amounted to transphobic hate crimes (Jamel, 2018).

Enacted stigma thus became our first main category. From this category, and the participants’ disclosed responses to being stigmatized, the relationship with identity work – the second main category – crystallized. The two specific types of identity work we subsequently discuss emerged as sub-categories. While establishing the conceptual framework, two new themes – abjectification and vulnerable embodiment – arose that helped to firm up relationships between the two main categories. Though the conceptual relation between enacted stigma and identity work is well-understood within the wider literature (Jetten et al., 2018), the liminality of this work – evident in the participants’ sense of in-betweenness with respect to culture and law – is a novel finding.

4. FINDINGS

This section examines how the participants responded to enacted transphobic stigma. It demonstrates that the limen is a highly contradictory site of identity work. The presentation of findings begins by documenting the social constraint that culturally-derived stigma imposes, as a phenomenal force of abjection that starts early in the participants' life-course. For the sake of consistency, their stigma experiences are described in retrospect – before legal and social policy reform, that is. Two sets of identity work techniques the participants employ are then discussed. One draws on culture as a resource, while the other displays the inherent limits of law.

4.1 Participants' enacted stigma experiences

4.1.1 Family rejection

As the locus of primary socialization, the family is the forming ground of identity. Yet, for the participants, it is also the site where transphobic stigma was first enacted upon them. Typically, this occurred when they disclosed their felt sense of difference to a family member. Some were immediately ostracized by their families who, according to Sita, force them to 'leave their home after they come out.' Sometimes this happens in childhood. Adra says that at the age of eight, 'when they came to know that I was transgender I was sent out of my home'. Though social exclusion often begins in the family, it extends beyond there. As Aditi puts it, 'I was an outcast from the house and the community'. Others suffered intense familial shame displayed in the public arena, as is shown by this excerpt:

My family filed a missing case on me. They knew exactly where I was and why I was gone. They just didn't want to admit to the public that I am transgender. I had to

appear before the court and present my case and tell them that I am transgender and that's why I left my home. (Puja)

Generally speaking, the interview texts are laced with anger and dismay mixed with intense feelings of regret about being rejected by family members.

4.1.2 Pejorative labelling, cruel teasing and police violence

Many of the participants were routinely given transphobic labels and publicly ridiculed due to their appearance and deportment. After emulating the bodily gestures of women in the household, Latha spoke of being cruelly teased by villagers, leading to an inner turmoil: 'I could not speak the truth about me.' Similarly, in Nisha's words, 'I had a lot of difficulties to adjust to how people taunted us.' Nila put it this way: 'people tease us mercilessly and we get hurt emotionally'. In addition to the stigma that derives from background cultural norms, popular culture is a readymade stigmatizing tool. Adya says that 'people used to call us names like *Chanthupottu*, and it hurt us so much.' Also negatively remarked upon by Rashmi and Deepa, *Chanthupottu* is the title of a 2005 Malayalam-language movie where the eponymous male protagonist is raised as a girl and is relentlessly ridiculed for their effeminateness.

Being subjected to derogatory speech acts frequently overlaps with acts of police violence. Here is a graphic example of these twin stigmatizing forces at work:

Once when I was living in the streets, after I left my house, I was caught by the police...and was put in jail until next day morning. Early next morning, when the sub-inspector came, I was presented as a 'chevian' [copulating rabbit] who was

caught. The sub-inspector asked me a few questions and then beat me up and he asked for mineral water to clean his hands. (Rashmi)

The theme of emotional suffering and its detrimental effect on life-chances, due to specific verbal and physical enactments of transphobic stigma, runs like a leitmotif through the participants' self-reflections. Prior to becoming self-employed, many were without work and some were homeless for a time.

4.1.3 Religion-related discrimination

The enacted transphobic stigma participants experience also has a strong religio-cultural root. Some associated this with one-sided interpretations of the tenets of the two main monotheistic religions in India, as is suggested by this statement:

We feel that religions are one of the biggest issues we face as they are completely against us.... Christians and Muslims come to us with phrases from the Bible and Quran to torture us. (Henna)

Specific manifestations of this stigma typically involve religious figures inflicting shame upon the participants. Some of this shame has a ritualized component. For example, although Hinduism is generally regarded as more tolerant of gender divergence, one Hindu participant faced difficulties being accepted by devotees, which manifested in a struggle to assert their right to wear the bindi adornment:

I had to start with a very small dot somewhere and I got beaten up for that. Gradually, I have to increase the size of the dot and after enduring more than hundred beatings that I was able to put the dot in the proper place. (Aditi)

There are religio-cultural forces, however, that militate against religious bigotry and intolerance. Particularly important for the participants, the next section discloses empowering cultural understandings and practices that derive from Hinduism's *hijra* identities.

4.2 Transphobic stigma-induced identity work

The feelings and experiences the participants describe, due to being negatively judged, correspond with social abjection. Their resulting identity work occurs in liminal spaces between the culturally situated particularity of the lifeworld, and Western rights-based legal frameworks that target transphobic stigma, but do not and – as will be argued – cannot fully compensate for the lived experience of this stigma. To recapitulate, the limen is a site where the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life is rendered unintelligible by discordant experiences; but it is also where creative, self-constituting identity work can occur. For the participants, two specific types of this work are prominent in accounts they gave of how they dealt with being abjectified.

4.2.1 Mirroring and witnessing

One significant aspect of the participants' abjection is that they experience being 'unwitnessed' – that is, they are seen in a way that contradicts their own 'self-images' (Devor, 2004, p. 46). Often they are wrongfully regarded as bearers of other stigmatized social identities. Adra puts it this way:

Society sees us always as either a sex worker or a criminal or a mentally challenged person....If I go outside now, half of the people will treat me good and the other half comment that I am a sex worker. Some of them ask for sex directly....They see me as a product to satisfy their needs.

This mistaken attribution of identity is intertwined with specific modes of embodiment which render participants perennially vulnerable to discrimination that cues off physical difference. One participant speaks for many when they say:

I want to reveal that I am a trans woman and openly say that I am a transpersonality. Many people have a concept that transgender means sex workers. I want to establish my identity and I do not want anyone to pass such comments about me.... [Yet] because I am a trans woman, wherever I go...I get only second priority.... When I wear sari and churidar, I feel comfortable and I may look like a woman, but my voice is not that of a woman. (Priya)

Though the social stigma participants experience stems from the weight of cultural expectations – due to which, for example, discrediting social identities are mistakenly attributed to them – culture also supplies them with identity defining resources. Indeed, to the extent that being unwitnessed strikes at the heart of self-identity, one live option is to employ identity-bolstering resources derived from a culturally supplied and socially validated identity model: the *hijra*.

Though Kerala lacks a traditional *hijra* subculture (Krishna, 2018), the *hijra* is a transgressive identity **that is widely known and recognized throughout India. As such, it provides transpeople with an identity template** (Reddy, 2005; Mount, 2020). Labelled the

country's 'third sex', the *hijra* is a liminal social group – at various times in the past both revered and despised (Hinchy, 2019). Though the *hijra* are still stigmatized in some quarters today, belief in their fertility-conferring powers lends them a degree of 'socio-religious legitimacy' (Ganju & Saggurti, 2017, p. 905). Many *hijras* make a living from singing and dancing at religious ceremonies celebrating weddings and births (Reddy, 2005). *Hijras* often live in adoptive families and cluster in neighbourhoods; groups from different areas comprise houses, or 'gharanas', to which the guru-follower relationship is central (Kalra, 2012, p. 123).

Now, of course, traditional *hijra* identities cannot be mapped directly onto transpeople's identities in India (Mount, 2020). Nevertheless, in response to their experiences of enacted transphobic stigma, a number of this study's participants actively drew on this social identity as a source of their own identity materials. Some participants left Kerala precisely so they could tap into *hijra* subculture. For example, after being rejected by her mother at the age of 15, Deepa briefly joined a *hijra* community in Bangalore. Going one step further, Puja clothed herself in the *hijra* identity – she effectively became *hijra*.

Having recourse to the *hijra* identity template fulfils two key identity-defining functions: witnessing and mirroring. To be witnessed is to be seen as whom one thinks one is (Devor, 2004). Through the responses of co-present others, who are unlike oneself, witnessing provides an independent form of self-verification (Burke & Stets, 1999). The positive experience of being witnessed is shown by Latha's comments about moving to a city in Tamil Nadu where a *hijra* subculture is prominent:

After introspection I realized the reasons for me reaching this stage... Somewhere there was a fault and things went wrong. This I realized was my identity. I realized that I won't reach anywhere if I go around as a woman inside and as a man on the

exterior. To find a solution for this I studied about hijra culture and went straight to Nagercoil.... [There] I learned to dress and move about like a woman.

The participants' ability to self-present as who they feel they are and not be subjected to a mistaken identity attribution – to be witnessed in other words – is a common theme in accounts of relocating to regions and states where the *hijra* are more accepted.

Mirroring is the opposite side of the coin to witnessing. Vital to self-formation in infancy (Winnicott, 2009), it is also a decisive moment at other stages in the life course (Devor, 2004). For the participants, to experience mirroring is to see approval and understanding reflected back in the reactions and attitudes of others who are like them. The following excerpt illustrates how much it means emotionally to be in the presence of, and recognized by, similar others:

A transgender person normally can live only with someone like them, as only they can understand the issues and stress of being one. This [hijra] culture is like a family... We live like a family, we go out like one, and attend functions like one. We create strong bonds which are equivalent to blood relations. When I am facing some issues or I am sad, they can feel it. (Puja)

Despite the lack of naturally occurring *hijra* communities in Kerala, the wide availability of this identity template led some participants to assemble their own families, modelled on traditional *hijra* households, under the patronage of a guru. As Deepa explains, 'On Sundays...I meet my guru, Adhira, who is like my mother. I accepted her as my mother after the floral rituals as per the Kalki *hijra* culture.' These self-created *hijra* family units are prime sites for being witnessed, as is suggested by this explanation of the social relations involved:

This is our [self-created] hijra culture. We have left our house, everyone we knew and our neighbourhood and have started a new life, with a new identity. In this new culture, we have a guru or mother. My mother is a lady named Ashwini. Ashwini has a sister. They both have another mother. This is how our culture works. Some of us have [adoptive trans] daughters. (Priya)

As the excerpt just quoted indicates, culture is a two-sided coin. The transphobic stigma, to which mirroring and witnessing are responses, stems from ambient cultural norms. Yet the wider culture also supplies the resources that participants' use in these twin forms of identity work. By drawing on the *hijra* as an identity template and establishing family units that fostered *hijra*-like kinship relations, they engaged in a process of self-transformation. **This identity work frees the participants from loneliness and shields them from family violence, but it is not unrestrictedly liberatory since the *hijra* is an identity mould with expectations of conformity to group norms.**

4.2.2 Scaffolding and identity pegging

Notwithstanding the affordances of culture, there are participants who continue to feel marginalized by cultural conventions. By adverting to the law, Latha is a prime example. Latha is part of a *hijra* family, established in another state. After the family came back to Kerala, however, Latha continues to suffer derogatory remarks when in public:

It is as if it is a man's prerogative to make such comments....We have to overcome such deeds and move forward. Our best ally in such situations is the law of the land.

It is the High Court that comes to our rescue. So we have to cling on to the laws and the High Court. (Latha)

Due to persistent mistreatment in public places, participants seek to engage with recent rights-based judicial and legislative interventions.

Within Kerala, trans-supportive laws and policies provide an empirical scaffolding for official ‘transgender’ identities. More specifically, the legal framework provides ‘institutional scaffoldings’ for identity work (Bulot, 2020, p. 837). One way is through documents of identity – such as the ‘transgender’ identity card introduced in Kerala by the Social Justice Department – which serve as ‘identity pegs’ (Goffman, 1963, p. 57). Being afforded the opportunity to use a feminized name on official documents is important for self-presentational identity work, as the following quote shows:

We can take the [transgender] ID card on the name we prefer. [Though] I can take it on my original name, as I have a female character within me, I take the card with the name I prefer. (Sita)

Beyond their official purpose, other documents of identity serve a similar function. As Aditi puts it, ‘I have the badge of a member of the state Transgender Justice Board. Now I have an identity in the society.’

Being able to use an official identity marker to claim rights and recognition gives participants the opportunity for their identities to be socially validated. In one sense, this represents the taking up of Western models of transgressive gender identity – in which subjects seek empowerment by identifying with a rights-seeking social movement and using the legal-institutional protections that stem from its political victories (Loh, 2018). In another

sense, however, identity pegging is a practical response to the daily lived experience of transphobic stigma. The participants constantly encounter contradictions between the legal recognition they are afforded, and the weight of cultural constraint that manifests in ongoing discrimination. For example, Indu expresses pride in being able to exercise official transgender voting rights, but also said: 'I don't dress like a woman. I don't want to give bad reputation to my family'. The notion of the law as an epiphenomenal institutional overlay upon more deeply sedimented and culturally-derived transphobic attitudes can also be seen in this excerpt:

The other day I was beaten up by a man. When I told this to a group of women and showed them my wounds, the reply was that 'you people are bound to die beaten up by men.' I did not complain [to the police] because our police will make the victim the accused, and the accused the victim, because our police are after our blood.....Even some of the staff members in the [Social Justice] Department do not accept us. (Jaya)

Some participants worry about the practical consequences of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019. Talking about this piece of legislation – just before the bill was passed into law – one remarked:

We just should not have to prove to others that we are transgender. That would only bring us more shame... If a bill that asks us to prove who we are is passed, we are no longer progressing as a community. (Adya)

By scaffolding identity work, supportive social policies and rights-based legislation can buttress the identities of those who continue to be threatened by transphobic stigma. Yet as the above example shows, there are concerns about the law being used as an instrument of identity regulation to produce official ‘transgender’ identities – whereby only the officially certificated can claim their rights. In this connection, Loh (2018) argues that the Western-slanted framing of transgender rights in the 2014 Supreme Court judgement and the various Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bills – the precursors to the 2019 Act – function to authorize traditional *hijra* and male-to-female transpeople more so than others. As Latha’s experience shows, however, being officially authorized as *hijra* is not tantamount to being socially accepted.

5. DISCUSSION

Since they are self-employed, the participants have neither the material security nor the identity-defining resources that large organizations provide. Instead, in attempting to counter the identity-threatening effects of transphobic stigma, they drew exclusively on two key identity-constituting external structures: culture and law. The analysis has shown that, **as objectified persons**, they find themselves in a liminal space. They are situated between culture as a source of enablement and constraint, on the one side, and the limitations of the law in counteracting deeply culturally sedimented transphobic norms, on the other side. The resulting sense of occupying a contradictory social location is reflected in the provisionality of the participants’ attempts to counter transphobic stigma. Despite of the robustness and creativity of their identity-bolstering efforts, suffering the pernicious effects of this stigma is one of the phenomenal realities of everyday life.

The lived experience of enacted stigma grates against newly asserted and claimed rights that officially authorize ‘transgender’ identities. Certainly, the giving of rights is

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widely embraced. Many participants deploy the legal category of ‘transgender’ and the social benefits it confers – such as voting rights – as identity resources. For them, the law is identity-constituting: it enables them to establish an externally legitimized identity. Nevertheless, through acts of omission and commission, the law perpetuates and amplifies the oppression of gender non-conforming minorities. On the implementation and enforcement side, for example, street-level bureaucrats remain a problem for our participants.

Participants’ continuing susceptibility to enacted transphobic stigma is not due, however, just to defects in policy style or legal design. From a decolonial standpoint, the law has inherent subject-constitutive epistemological implications and practical limitations. The findings show that perennial tension exists between the universal – transpeople as disembodied rights-bearing human persons – and the particular: transpeople as distinct, embodied, stigmatized and oppressed. A participant can use their officially registered ‘transgender’ identity card to vote but suffer discrimination – because of how they dress, talk and walk – almost literally the moment they leave the voting booth. Simply put, the law is a blunt instrument of social justice. Arguably, the Kantian image of a decontextualized autonomous subject, upon which the Western conception of legal rights and personhood is founded, only affords an ‘amputated acknowledgement’ (Raghavan, 2017, p. 161) of transpeople’s lived, embodied experiences of transphobic stigma, and the social disadvantage that results. To the extent that legal frameworks occlude the participants’ embodied life experiences, they neither tap deeply enough into the root causes of transphobic stigma, nor do they adequately mitigate its identity-threatening effects.

If establishing legal ‘transgender’ personhood is a necessary step on the path towards recognition, this study’s findings show that it is not sufficient due to the weight of the ambient cultural norms that sustain transphobia. For the participants, culture is a source both of identity threat and of identity materials. Undoubtedly, those who draw on culturally

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supplied models of non-conforming gender identities – the *hijra* – are **engaging in agential identity work**. By creating family units that emulate traditional *hijra* kinship, they establish venues for the vitally important self-formative identity work of mirroring and witnessing. Yet, despite the agential nature of this identity work, the constraining effects of culture are ever-present as the participants **not only accede to group norms** but also continue to encounter transphobic stigma. The inherent vulnerability of embodiment emerged as a key factor that renders them susceptible to this stigma. As phenomenologists suggest, to exist is to experience in and through the body, but also to ‘have’ a body – the body considered as an object – which renders the individual ‘open and vulnerable to the world’ (Wehrle, 2020, p. 500). From childhood to adulthood, the participants’ bodies attracted negative judgements, social opprobrium and violence. Yet it is through their specific mode of embodiment that many understand themselves to be transpeople. The generalizable point is this: the body is central to the experiential structures through which transphobic stigma is both culturally transmitted, and encountered as an identity threat.

The preceding finding has wider implications for studies of identity work by the abjectified within liminal social spaces that contain identity threats but also present opportunities to reconstitute the self. For those who bear bodily markers of stigma, the personally transformational potential of identity work in the limen is limited by the need for thoroughgoing socio-cultural transformation. Clearly, in Kerala as elsewhere in India, a gulf exists between ‘the statutory and the customary’ (Relis, 2016, p. 357). If the law cannot reach deeply enough into the depths of the lifeworld to transform widely held transphobic attitudes, then legal reform that targets transphobic stigma must be accompanied by cultural change (Misra & Ferdous, 2017).

One way of overcoming oppressive sociocultural circumstances is by tapping into ‘the reciprocal relation between subjective and social reconstruction’ (Pinar, 2011, p. 100). The

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vulnerability of embodiment is a source of transpeople's susceptibility to culturally-derived transphobic stigma, but it also conceivably provides the basis for forging collective efforts to counter this stigma. Of relevance here is the decolonial-theoretic notion of the 'self-in-coalition', which hinges on 'how the concrete, in-the-flesh experiences of selfhood' can contribute to the intersubjective relationality that is a prerequisite of 'the complex interrelatedness required for coalition' (Zaytoun, 2019, p. 48). Drawing on the transformational potential of embodied selves in coalition is one means of striving for social inclusion and recognition for Keralan transpeople. Though none of the participants had strong connections to trans activist groups, two – Latha and Henna – established their own charities to help the most socially marginalized of transpeople: those who are homeless and starving. Beyond maintaining bare life, more work is required to understand the role of charitable organizations as venues for the formation of coalitional selves.

These findings must be balanced against this study's limitations. Since they are self-employed, the participants are predominantly members of the urban petty bourgeoisie. Identity work by transpeople in other class locations is likely to differ. For example, work by Mount (2020) suggests that aspirational middle class trans women working in NGOs seek to distinguish themselves from the working class status of the *hijra*. To understand better the full range of identity threats faced by transpeople in India, there is a pressing need to examine how the cross-cutting cleavages of class and caste filter or reinforce transphobic stigma. Similarly, how large commercial organisations in India channel this stigma, and their role as venues for identity work by transpeople, merits further attention. For those who manage to secure jobs in corporations, to what extent do they draw on organisationally situated identity resources, relative to wider cultural identity templates and legally codified identity pegs? Focusing on individuals who enact transphobic stigma is another urgent task. In this

connection, Puri's (2016) recent ethnographic study of police discrimination against gender transgressive minorities in Delhi serves as a model to be emulated in future research.

6. CONCLUSION

This study provides a paradigmatic example of identity work by those who experience enacted transphobic stigma. In two ways it furnishes the 'fuller' picture of 'identities-in-context' that Pratt (2020, p. 888) calls for within studies of identity work by organizational scholars. Firstly, by focusing on stigmatized persons in India, it brings to the fore the dynamics of identity work within a liminal social context replete with ambiguities and contradictions. The participants face an inhospitable environment of transphobic fear and hate, contradictory cultural norms, and variegated legal institutions. **Their uneasy positioning between cultural custom and postcolonial legal institutions is the epitome of liminality (Bhabha, 1994). Through documenting their identity work responses, this study provides a window into stigmatized individuals' experiences of the social contradictions that typify the postcolonial milieu. By showing the everyday challenges the participants face, it contributes an in-depth understanding of the liminal process of abjection to management studies of identity, liminality and postcolonial life (Prasad, 2014; Yousfi, 2014).**

Secondly, by broadening the context beyond the confines of large organizations, this study has contributed insights into how the abjected subject relates to external structures. In response to significant identity threats, the participants' engaged in identity work within the limits circumscribed by culture and law. With regard to culture, we demonstrate that the concept of abjection supplies the much-needed link between sociocultural context and embodied identity work in liminal social spaces. **Though this work has interested management scholars for at least a decade (Beech, 2011), this conceptual connection has**

hitherto scarcely been made. Certainly, the potential to exercise self-constituting agency is always already present in the limen and available to the abjectified. Yet the vulnerability of embodiment – that is, the susceptibility of the participants to stigmatization due to the weight of ambient cultural norms that cue off perceived physical difference – presents challenges in actualizing this potential. To compensate for the truncated acknowledgement currently given to them, it is necessary to move beyond rigid legal constructs while simultaneously recognizing that recent moves to enshrine legal rights for transpeople in India are an important part of the institutional context in which their daily identity struggles occur.

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TABLE 1 Profile of research participants.

Pseudonym	Age range	Education level	Business
Aditi	30-39	10th grade	Freelance acting
Giva	20-29	8th grade	Food stall
Henna	20-29	Bachelor degree	Private charitable organization
Adra	30-39	7th grade	Clothing sales
Jaya	20-29	Primary education	Sex work; delivery business
Kamala	30-39	Law degree	Restaurant
Neha	20-29	Not available	Freelance tailoring
Nila	20-29	9th grade	Juice stall
Sarika	40-49	10th grade	Make-up artistry
Tara	40-49	10th grade	Freelance acting; dance teaching
Deepa	30-39	Not available	Freelance tailoring; fashion design
Hira	20-29	Current college student	Dance school
Kavita	30-39	10th grade	Make-up artistry
Latha	40-49	12 grade	Restaurant; charitable organization
Leela	40-49	College diploma	Catering
Manju	20-29	Not available	Farming
Nisha	30-39	10th grade	Freelance tailoring
Preeti	20-29	9th grade	Cloth merchant
Priya	20-29	Masters degree	Catering
Puja	20-29	Current college student	Recycled item jewellery
Roopa	30-39	10th grade	Fishmonger; contract cleaning
Rashmi	40-49	7th grade	Saree sales
Rekha	20-29	9th grade	Contract cleaning; poultry sales
Adya	20-29	Not available	Beautician
Sita	30-39	9th grade	Dance teaching
Rema	30-39	11th grade	Fruit chip sales
Dhanya	40-49	College diploma	Freelance tutoring
Indu	30-39	College diploma	Poultry sales