



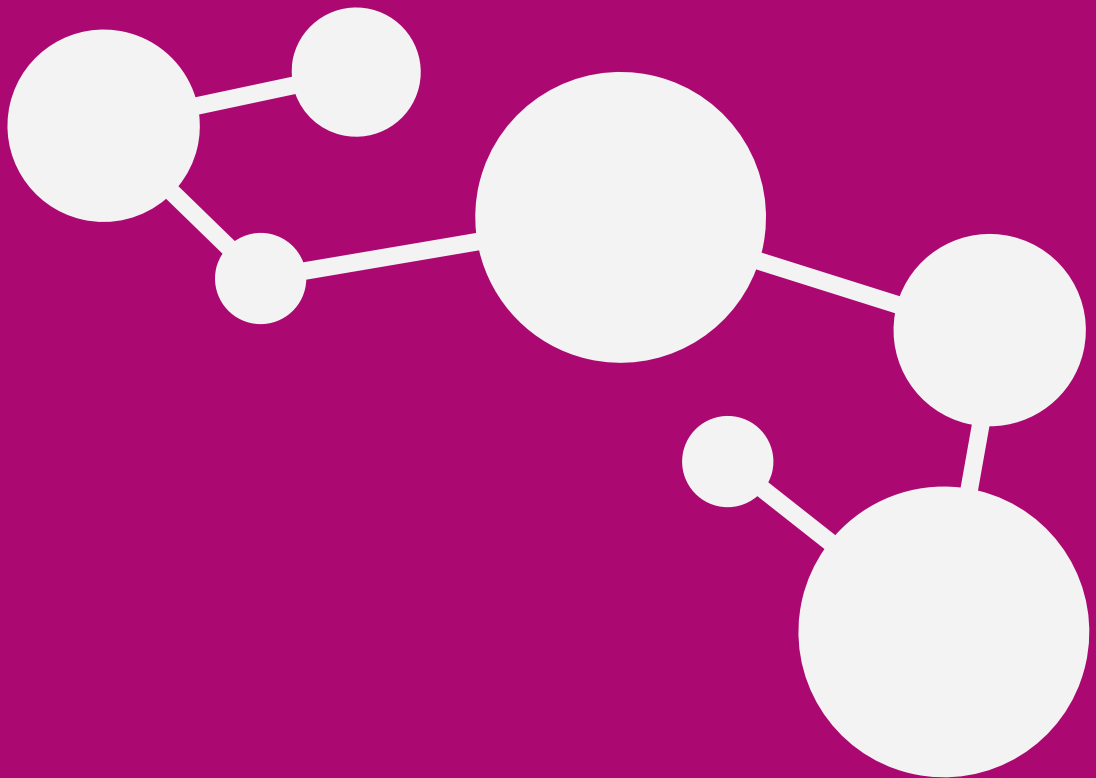
TRANS AND HIJRA LIVES IN THE COVID-19 ERA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AUTHORS

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INTRODUCTION

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been immeasurably tremendous to say the least. In addition to a worldwide death toll that exceeds two million, the pandemic has thrust the global economy into the deepest global recession since the Second World War, pushing at least 88 million people into extreme poverty (Blake and Wadhwa 2020). The simultaneous shock to healthcare spending, school closures, reduced hours or wage or wholesale loss of employment loom large for people across the world (Blake and Wadhwa 2020). But for some communities, the impact of COVID-19 has been especially acute because it exacerbates inequalities they had already faced prior to the pandemic (Tai et al. 2021). This is especially true for refugees (Ostrach et al. 2020), transgender individuals (Human Rights Campaign 2020; National LGBT Cancer Network 2020; Poteat et al. 2020), and sex workers (Lam 2020; Singer et al. 2020). This report examines the impact of COVID-19 on transgender refugees and sex workers who face heightened risks of economic, housing, safety, and healthcare insecurities in the wake of the pandemic. We report findings from an exploratory, qualitative study that assessed COVID-19's impact on economic stability, housing security, access to healthcare, and exposure to violence among transgender refugees and sex workers in the Netherlands and transgender and sex worker hijras in Bangladesh. Our goal is not only to build knowledge on the social and economic well-being of these communities, but also to inform appropriate policy responses to address their needs.

This study involved qualitative interviews with transgender refugees and sex workers in the Netherlands and transgender and sex worker hijras in Bangladesh. We conducted 20 interviews with hijras in Bangladesh that ranged from 30 to 70 minutes and 12 interviews with transgender communities in the Netherlands that ranged from 30 to 100 minutes. The main findings of this research are as follows:

STUDY FINDINGS

This study involved qualitative interviews with transgender refugees and sex workers in the Netherlands and transgender and sex worker hijras in Bangladesh. We conducted 20 interviews with hijras in Bangladesh that ranged from 30 to 70 minutes and 12 interviews with transgender communities in the Netherlands that ranged from 30 to 100 minutes. The main findings of this research are as follows:

- **COVID-19 pushed transgender refugees and sex workers into economic distress in both Bangladesh and the Netherlands.** Most of those we interviewed experienced severe job and income loss, and many of these individuals had limited sources of income to begin with. Prior to the pandemic, transgender refugees and sex workers reported difficulty accessing jobs in the traditional labor market, due to employment discrimination, and thus relied on sex work for income. However, COVID-19 related restrictions stripped them of this income source, and many transgender refugees and sex workers no longer had the adequate means to survive.
- **COVID-19 exacerbated ongoing issues with accessing safe and secure housing for hijras in Bangladesh.** Many hijras in Bangladesh reported facing housing discrimination because of their gender identity prior to the pandemic. In the wake of the pandemic, hijras who lost their sources of income and could no longer afford to pay rent were evicted and forced to live in close quarters with other hijras, increasing their exposure to COVID-19. This was not the case in the Netherlands, where interviewees did not raise any concerns about housing.
- **Hijras in Bangladesh have completely withdrawn from seeking help from medical institutions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas transgender refugees and sex workers in the Netherlands received inconsistent guidance on whether and how to receive healthcare.** Interviewees noted that healthcare services effectively ceased in Bangladesh and many hijras simply stopped seeking healthcare services. In the Netherlands, interviewees reported that they were prohibited from seeking medical help, either because they presented with COVID-19 symptoms or because they did not present COVID-19 symptoms. In either case, many potentially life-threatening medical issues have been left untreated in both countries since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Moreover, interviewees in both countries reported not feeling respected by medical staff and in some cases being refused treatment because of their gender identity.
- **Hijras in Bangladesh were stigmatized as “carriers and spreaders” of COVID-19 and were thus subjected to violence from the public and law enforcement.** Along with COVID-19, many members of the public spread malicious rumors about hijras carrying the virus, which launched a series of attacks from public and law enforcement officials on these individuals.
- **In the Netherlands, violence operated in perhaps more covert ways.** In some cases, it declined because people were in lockdown, but in other cases, lockdown meant increased exposure to perpetrators. This manifested differently in different contexts. However, sex workers reported that they were subject to greater forms of violence- from both clients and law enforcement- because of the precarious situation in which they were placed by conducting sex work during the lockdown.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, we suggest the following recommendations specific to each country:

Bangladesh:

- An independent agency should conduct an audit of law enforcement agencies and security agencies that engage in violence against hijras to bring the unnecessary harassment and detainment of the hijras to an end.
- An independent agency should train medical professionals on treating hijra populations to minimize the barriers hijras face in accessing healthcare in both private and public hospitals.
- Lawmakers should enact anti-discrimination laws to safeguard hijras against discrimination and social and public hostilities.
- Public and private sector organizations should collaborate to develop a tailored social campaign to fight social prejudice against the hijras, specifically targeting housing discrimination against hijras.
- Establish a monitoring and documentation cell within the National Human Rights Commission to keep track of the violations hijras experience on a daily basis.
- The Bangladeshi Government should provide special support packages for hijras and hijra sex workers so they are not forced into poverty in contingency situations as they were during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Netherlands:

- Dutch lawmakers should develop avenues for transgender individuals to report employment, housing, and healthcare discrimination and take these concerns seriously.
- Dutch law enforcement agencies should end the criminalization of sex work during COVID-19 and the unnecessary use of excessive fines for those who are caught engaging in sex work during the pandemic.
- The Dutch Government should implement and administer accessible and coordinated services that enable individuals with or without residential permit status to safely obtain stable employment.
- Healthcare stakeholders in the Netherlands should develop, standardize, and enforce uniform protocols for healthcare services when medical resources are strapped, as was the case during the COVID-19 crisis.
- The Dutch Government should provide financial relief packages commensurate with the cost of living.



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