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## Editorial

We began preparations for this issue of the newsletter after a lot of deliberation on how marginal voices have to secure a space within the centre of feminist scholarship and activism. Even as we were almost wrapping up the issue for publication, the government pushed through The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026, in both houses of Parliament that overturns significant rights granted by the Supreme Court in 2014. Our issue carries the responses of activists across the board, pointing to the government's attempt to snatch away from people their hard won rights, emerging from consistent struggle over the years through an Act that excludes rather than includes diversity.

Intersectionality highlights how the coming together of our multiple social locations either enhances privilege or pushes us to the lack of it. We propose to publish in the next few issues the different experiences of and the issues faced by cis-women and other gender non-conforming persons at the multiple intersections of power and marginality. The issues of the newsletter will focus on different kinds of marginal locations and will use intersectionality as the framework.

In this issue, we bring attention to two such intersectional locations that actively prevent access of women and persons from certain margins to rights even though they have gained some visibility, i.e., the experience of queer-transpeople and cis-women/persons with

disability. The experiences of their lives will highlight the other intersections they are located within, be it religious location, ethnicity as identity, caste and class as material dis-privilege, and several unaccounted others.

Through this particular issue, we would like to self-reflexively admit that despite being an interdisciplinary field and also foregrounding coalitional politics, Women's Studies and the women's movement has given insufficient space to questions of disability and queer-trans issues. Therefore, we invited reflections, research writings, autoethnographic notes, and other such contributions through which we attempt to centre the experiences of queer-trans individuals, persons with disability, allies and groups. The reflections have centred on experience, while also engaging with feminisms.

Some of the writings reflect the experience of working with a queer-trans collective and shelter home; the complications around gender that confront feminism, through a trans-queer lens; questions around trans-masculinity and gender; a transmasculine disability rights voice speaking of queer organising, reflections of a queer blind academic; and what it means to be a person with intellectual disability who never find a voice anywhere. All writings speak from their respective locations in their own voice. As editorial team members we are delighted that the IAWS newsletter finds resonance with these voices.

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**Editorial team for the issue:**

**Meena Gopal**

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## **A Trans-Feminist Critique of the Centrality of AGAB' Identification in Indian Feminism**

**Rahul Vadakka Chandran (Riza)**

### **Introduction**

The current wave of right-wing populism across the Global North and South, emboldened by the rhetoric of anti-genderism and racialization, has given rise to a crisis of gender and sexual justice, which is perhaps most acutely visible in the organized efforts to degender<sup>2</sup> the trans community and instrumentalize them as a strategy to manufacture moral panic. A crucial political question that emerges at this critical juncture is whether the feminist, queer, and broader progressive domain is conceptually and organizationally equipped to resist this crisis. This article identifies and explores a central limitation within the queer and feminist politics of India: the persistence of an AGAB-based definition for its political subject. This definition is uncritically sustained as a boundary marker in many progressive spaces across the country. By analyzing organizational policies, selected feminist writings, as well as my own experiences within queer-feminist spaces, this article details the overt and covert mechanisms of transmisogyny.

Transmisogyny, according to Jules Gill-Peterson, is the targeted devaluation of both trans femininity and people perceived to be trans feminine, regardless of how they understand themselves (Gill-Peterson, 2024). It is the specific form of discrimination, argues Julia Serano, that victimises a trans person when they are ridiculed and dismissed not merely for the mismatch between their gender expression and social norms, but also

for their expression of femaleness or femininity. In other words, it can be explained as the intersection of oppositional sexism (the enforcement of a rigid gender binary) and traditional sexism (the devaluation of femininity) (Serano, 2007). This article critically examines the reactionary, mutually reinforcing structures of AGAB-based organizing and transmisogynistic narratives. By doing so, it uncovers the implications of how certain forms of gender essentialism are instrumentalized through the rationale of attending to a supposedly unequal terrain of privilege and power.

### **Anti-gender ideology politics and trans-exclusionary feminism**

Locating the cross-cultural development of anti-gender campaigns and the separate, yet ideologically adjacent trajectory of 'gender critical feminism' or 'TERFism'<sup>3</sup> provides the necessary background for why and how queer-feminist spaces in India are now faced with a political urgency to be reformed in light of trans-feminist critiques. The ability to generate mass moral panic and societal polarisation has, in the past decade, made anti-gender politics a suitable and effective strategy for right-wing populists. As the name suggests, the anti-gender ideology movement (or simply the anti-gender movement) is a political mobilization formed around the goal of eliminating 'gender ideology.' Unlike the conceptions of gender that most progressive folks are familiar with from the long history of discussions and debates informed by queer, trans, and feminist activism,

‘gender’ within anti-gender ideology functions as a conspiracy theory, a flexible frame onto which the global right projects any and all of its threats as it finds convenient (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021). This process of assigning seemingly secular, scientific, and moral threats onto the flexible frame of ‘gender’ becomes clear in specific local contexts. For religious fundamentalists and right-wing political actors in Kerala vocally opposed to ‘gender ideology’, these manufactured threats are evidenced by events and processes such as legally sanctioned queer relationships, medical transition of sex by transgender people, the gender-neutral school uniform policy and other gender-sensitive educational reforms introduced by the left government apparently as a means to covertly import ‘Western gender ideology’ (Vadukka Chandran (Riza), 2025).

On the other hand, trans-exclusionary feminist streams championed by Germaine Greer, Nina Power, Mary Daly, and others have a much longer history of scholarship and activism aimed at protecting so-called sex-based rights. These are nothing but attempts to strip trans women of their long-fought-for legal, medical, and socio-cultural advancements, including the elimination of trans women as a class from women’s and feminist domains, and eventually from the broader society altogether. TERFism thus inverts the lived reality of oppressed- oppressor relationships at the core of gendered hierarchy, attributing an (imagined) domination to trans femininity over a victimized cis womanhood. The objectives and advocacy of TERF collectives to this day are conceptually shaped and morally legitimized by influential texts like *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979) authored by radical feminist scholar Janice G. Raymond along with notorious trans-exclusionary events such

as Michfest, a lesbian feminist women’s music festival (1976-2015) held in Michigan, wherein trans women were excluded under its ‘womyn-born-womyn-only’ policy. From securing judicial victories that enforce a cissexist, legal definition for ‘biological woman’, to reshaping mainstream media and public discourse on ‘trans issues’, the influence of TERFism has risen alarmingly in recent years across Western countries (Hines, 2017). The current transnationalization of these reactionary forces, evidenced by their recent cultural interruption in South Asian pockets such as Kerala, creates an urgent and critical imperative for gender justice advocates to self- reflexively confront the unchecked transmisogyny within their own political spaces—the very weaknesses that mirror the tools of right-wing populism.

### AGAB-based exclusion in Indian feminism

AGAB: assigned gender/sex at birth, describes the medical and legal process through which infants are categorized as male or female, a process that also pathologizes intersex people based on a superficial inspection, primarily of genitalia. Hence, transgender and intersex people can conveniently use it, if needed, to explain their unique experience of being non-consensually gendered by the cis-hetero-normative patriarchal system, a classification that forced them to endure a portion of their lives under the burden of a dissatisfying gender. AGAB, thus, is the marking of a past event in one’s life that had long-lasting and socially significant influence on trans and intersex individuals, a non-consensual marking that many of them choose to transgress legally, socially, and medically (via HRT and gender affirming surgeries). Most importantly, this malleability of ‘assigned sex/gender’ makes it a transformable characteristic rather than an immutable and

lifelong identity. At some rare moments, such as in health-related inquiry, one might need to share information about their AGAB in ways such as: I was assigned female at birth (AFAB) or they were assigned male at birth (AMAB), etc. The verb in the past tense rightly indicates the impossibility of assuming anything definite about a person in the present based solely on the sex they were assigned at birth. This includes conclusions about their current body, experiences, genital status, fertility status, hormone profile, or exposure to misogyny.

However, there exists a tendency in many queer-feminist and progressive spaces, especially in India, to treat AGAB as a stable and coherent identity, a categorization applicable to any person at any given point of their life, irrespective of the fact that they may or may not have changed their gender and/or sex. This is done under the guise of attending to a set of social and biological lived realities. Queer-feminist organizations that have adopted an 'AFAB LBT only' policy exemplify this trend. It is important to highlight at this point that the Indian feminist organizations with the above-mentioned AGAB criteria are not overt advocates of anti-trans women hatred. On the contrary, they publicly position themselves as allies of the trans woman community, a characteristic that distinguishes them from the historical trajectory of TERFism. However, the decision to exclude so-called 'AMAB trans people,' including trans women, from women's, queer, and feminist organizations, particularly in the form of institutionalized policy, perpetrates gendered injustice, whether intentionally or not. The self-contradictory nature of the 'AFAB LBT' policy itself indicates the primary problem; for example, it creates a space for lesbian and bisexual women that is devoid of lesbian and bisexual women of trans experience (e.g., trans lesbians). In her

book *Whipping Girl*, trans-feminist scholar Julia Serano (2007) explains the nature and function of two mutually entwined ideas often associated with trans women: 'male socialization' and 'male biology.' She argues that a transmisogynistic interpretation of these ideas underlies the justification for trans women's exclusion from women's spaces while exposing their anti-feminist foundations.

The exclusion of trans women from queer women's and feminist spaces operates by attributing to them certain essential and universal gendered characteristics, such as those entailed by 'male socialization' and 'male biology.' This process thus implies that trans women can and should be distinguished from those who were assigned female at birth in a meaningful way, consequently positioning them as lesser women and/or having a weaker claim to womanhood. The transmisogynistic rationale of this process becomes more evident if we look closely at the very ideological justifications, such as 'male socialisation' and 'male biology,' which may be weaponized covertly, but nevertheless have a direct and significant material impact on trans women's lives. The 'male socialization' argument claims that trans women, having been socialised as boys/men prior to transitioning, are able to enjoy male privileges and internalize reactionary masculine traits such as aggressiveness and invasive forms of hypersexuality. Similarly, the 'male biology' argument posits that male physical traits that trans women carry on in their body, especially the presence of a penis, create intrinsic masculine behaviors, desires, and even a mystic 'masculine energy.' These two co-constitutive ideas imply that trans women and AFAB-identified women have characteristics that don't overlap and are rather mutually opposed, such as experience, privilege,

biology, behavior, and desire. Thus, proponents of this view believe that the inclusion of trans women in queer-feminist spaces would cause, at best, an unnecessary contradiction and, at worst, active harm and risk within a supposedly safe space. The disproportionate emphasis, or in other words, weaponization, of the real and imagined effects of AGAB is the fundamental mechanism of AGAB-based exclusion of trans women from women's spaces (Serano, 2022).

Bio-essentialist beliefs about sex, gender, body, power, and privilege are translated in this way into transmisogyny. Rather than empathetically understanding the pain and struggle experienced by trans women while being forced to be closeted, only the single aspect of male privilege, which itself is not a uniform or necessary experience, is picked from the nuanced context of the past and weaponized to invalidate their current lived reality as women. This transmisogynist approach, built upon a lack of intersectional analysis, continues to cast trans women as people 'permanently poisoned by maleness'—a subtle form of degendering (Serano, 2023). In her 2020 queer-feminist book *Atheetha Sakshyangal* (Transcendental Testimonies), the prominent Malayali feminist scholar P. Geetha repeats this transmisogynistic idea despite being vocally inclusive of trans women's experiences and rights: '...people on the female-to-male (FTM) trans spectrum are faced with more difficulties/complexities than people on the male-to-female (MTF) trans spectrum [...] The manifestations of male supremacist power and oppression bring these differences to light' (translated by the author). Instead of acknowledging differential modes of challenges faced by people of varying trans identities, Geetha presents a misconceived hierarchy of gender privilege in which trans

people on the MTF spectrum are comparatively more privileged than other gender minorities, attributing this disparity somehow to the effects of 'male supremacy.' From organizational policies to queer-feminist texts, the evidence reveals the centrality of transmisogyny that is rampant in India's progressive spaces.

I witnessed a similar, yet casual, invocation of safety and privilege to justify transmisogyny in 2023 on a WhatsApp group exclusively for queer-trans housing inquiries. A member of the group, a cis queer woman, was searching for potential AFAB-identified roommates. When faced with criticism, the author of the message and many others defended this AGAB-based exclusion by arguing it was to ensure the safety and security of AFAB women traumatized by male violence. The disturbing implication of this narrative was clear: that trans women can be classified with cisgender men in a single moral category where there is no difference between women of trans experience and cis men who have perpetuated misogynistic violence, all because of their same assigned sex/gender! Conversely, any so-called 'AFAB-identified person' is understood as having proximity to an 'innocence' of cis-heteronormative womanhood, by virtue of birth. Until queer, feminist, and progressive activists in India acknowledge and reform their transmisogynistic policies and integrate intersectional perspectives informed by trans-feminist criticism, they will perpetuate systemic gender injustice and active discrimination. They will also remain incapable of giving an honest, ethically self-reflexive response to a simple rhetorical question like 'what is a woman?'<sup>24</sup> raised by proponents of anti-gender politics.

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## End notes

- 1 Assigned gender/sex at birth
- 2 To ‘degender’ is to systematically deny, invalidate, or erase a person’s gender identity, often by reducing them to their sex assigned at birth.
- 3 Trans-exclusionary radical feminism
- 4 This question is a popular anti-trans rhetorical device designed to justify cissexism—the denial of the authenticity of trans people’s gender identities—under the guise of defending a supposedly simple, logical, and scientific truth about ‘biological sex.’

## Additional Notes

- a. This analytical piece outlines central mechanisms of transmisogyny, though its manifestations extend beyond the scope of this article. To learn more, read: Gill-Peterson (2024), Serano (2007), and Serano (2022).
- b. I am deeply grateful to my dear friend Simran Tapaswi for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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## **Promoting Justice for Women with Disabilities in India: A Personal journey**

**Kuhu Das (She/Her)**

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The Census-2011 reports 11,824,355 women with disabilities as compared to 14,986,202 men with disabilities i.e., disabled women constitute 44.09 percent of the total disabled population. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, which promises non-discrimination and equal opportunities, and various government schemes focused on education, employment, and / or healthcare misses the gender lens. This law was brought in India to maintain consonance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the international treaty adopted in 2006 that promotes, protects, and ensures the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, shifting the view from charity to rights-based inclusion in society. It mandates that member states harmonize laws, implement its provisions, and monitor progress, covering rights to education, health, work, independent living, and participation in public life.

While India has specific law and policies aimed at empowering persons with disabilities, it lacks a gender focus which is essential to address the inequality faced by women with disabilities in comparison to disabled men and non-disabled women. At the beginning of my career, I started working on women's rights, as there was little awareness around disability rights at that point of time. I considered my gender identity as primary and my disability as interfering with the realization of my gender identity. Though working with women's rights issues was my dream and desire

from the very beginning of my career I never thought of disability rights at that juncture of my journey. Working in the women's rights field gave me the insight that while the mainstream movements do speak about the rights of those at the intersections of marginality, which are mostly Dalits, Adivasis, women in sex work, women living in forest, women labour, it hardly raised concerns of women with disabilities as a critical intersection and area of concern.

I shifted to working in disability when a mentor in the disability field told me that the field lacked strong leadership and advocacy activists, and I should be working for disability rights. As that thought struck my mind. I started working in a leading disability rights organization, which worked towards improving rehabilitation services but had no focus on gender within disability as such. In fact, this is the common practice in most of the disability organisations in India and West Bengal, where people believe that whether men or women; all disabled persons face similar discrimination and barriers. There is little recognition of the fact that women and girls with disabilities have separate issues around gender and they face double – triple gender-based discriminations and violence as well. In India, women with disabilities (WWDs) face multilayered disadvantage and unusual marginalization due to intersecting gender and disability biases, leading to severe inequality in education, employment, health, and social participation, with extensive and all kind of violences.

Using the UNCRPD 2007 as a tool, I began my journey in rural West Bengal, working with girls and women with disabilities, spreading awareness on gender inequality within disability and enabling them to access rights and entitlements. Article 6 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognises the fact that Women and Girls with Disabilities face multiple layers and forms of discrimination and marginalisation. Article 6 mandates States Parties to take measures for their full and equal enjoyment of rights, ensuring their advancement and empowerment enabling them to exercise their basic human rights, independence, and live a respectful life with dignity. Realisation of the mandates under Article 6 requires states to acknowledge intersectional discrimination primarily of gender and disability along with other social identities of women with disabilities like class, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, and take measures accordingly.

As my connections within the communities deepened I came to realise that girls and women with disabilities are often isolated, economically dependent, and disproportionately affected by abuse, lacking access to basic entitlements despite legal provisions, highlighting a critical gap between policy and ground reality that requires focused actions and systemic change. I came to realise that the women with disabilities face double discrimination due to both gender and disability, leading to greater exclusion from education, employment, healthcare, and higher risks of violence, abuse and marginalization.

In developed countries, where the disability movements have been active for more than 50 years, women with disabilities are found to be under-represented in leadership or decision-making positions as always. Though disability

rights groups in India are increasingly advocating for inclusion under frameworks like the UNCRPD, there is little focus on the specific concerns of girls and women with disabilities. For example, while all disability activists are talking of inclusion in education, there is no discussion about girls with disabilities dropping out in middle and high school as much for financial reasons as for family's concerns around safety and protection and inaccessibility of school infrastructures. For me, my real struggle started here and it is still continuing. Though UNCRPD clearly recognised gender and disability as a critical issue, I still find it is very difficult / challenging to make people, who are working for rights of disabled people to understand, recognise and accept the gender issue within disability.

Though advocacy efforts of the women's movement are growing to create platforms for joint action and enforcement of legal rights, the mainstream women's movement is still largely focused on gender issues, and less in the specific barriers that recognizes the intersectional identities and rights of disabled women. UN Women has reported in 2018-19 that

- The global literacy rate is as low as three per cent (3%) for all adults with disabilities, and one per cent (1%) for women with disabilities. Compared to men without disabilities, women with disabilities are three times more likely to be illiterate.
- Compared to men without disabilities, women with disabilities are two times less likely to be employed
- Compared to women without disabilities, women with disabilities are three times more likely to have unmet needs for health care.

- Women and girls with disabilities experience higher rates of gender-based violence, sexual abuse, neglect, maltreatment and exploitation than women and girls without disabilities.
- Women with disabilities are severely underrepresented in decision-making process: evidence from 19 countries in 2017 shows that only 2.3 per cent of women with disabilities held a position as a legislator, senior official, or manager. Out of 18 countries in Asia and the Pacific region, only four countries have women parliamentarians with disabilities ranged from 0.3 to 6.3 per cent
- Women with disabilities are underrepresented in gender equality institutions too (government bodies, independent agencies, and civil society organizations): Only 5 countries in Asia Pacific Region have 9% women with disabilities in the national machineries for gender equality institutions.

Working for more than 25 years in the field of gender and disability, I feel the changes that have taken place are superficial. While the state in India has made laws and rolled out different schemes for disabled people in India, effective changes in the important policies or speedy and full implementation of 2016 RPWD Act which is required to make systemic changes has not been backed up by strong actions. For example, there is little gender disaggregated data available for disability across domains. Since 2005 I have raised the concerns relating to exclusion of women and girls with disabilities and after a long fight, for the first time the 2nd CEDAW shadow / alternative report submitted by National Alliance of Women (NAWO) included a paragraph on women and girls with disabilities.

The CRPD Country report to the CRPD Committee in September 2019 did not give specific, desegregated data and information on the advancement of women with disabilities. The CEDAW India country report presented by the Government of India, failed to give concrete data and information on women and girls with disabilities in the government report. NCRB is still apathetic about including data of crimes against women with disabilities, and therefore, we do not have any authentic data around violence unleashed against women with disabilities. As part of the Women with Disabilities India Network, we submitted a comprehensive alternate report on Article 6 to bring forth the actual status of women with disabilities on ground. I also have been part of the alternative report by the consortium of disability organisations across India.

Of the other reports on status of women in India, presently the most relevant is the India National Review Report for Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action [BPfA] (2024). This report reflects the same indifferent attitude and apathy of the government in the matter related to the actions / measures taken for advancement of women with disabilities in the key domains of life and living. The report has no significant reporting on how the marginalised women like women with disabilities has been made part of the women's empowerment process relating to implementation of BPfA. The report does not even mention clearly what attempts have been made or any structured plan of action which would help in inclusion of women with disabilities in a holistic manner. The report also does not clarify how the issue of intersectionality of gender and disability has been addressed while it disproportionately affects women and girls with disabilities, who constantly find themselves at the nexus of multiple forms of

discrimination and marginalization and the critical issue of intersectionality of gender, disability and other social identities that compound the problem further.

It is evident that the interlinking between all the movements that are working for human rights of one or other vulnerable groups, can strengthen the movement to achieve justice for all. In addition to this, we need to ensure

1. Disaggregated data of status of women with disabilities must be made mandatory and made available in the public domain
2. Mandatory inclusion of girls and women with disabilities in every policy and program for gender equality so that they get equal access to all resources that covers the critical development domains –education, skill development, health, safety etc.
3. Specific plan of action along with appropriate budget provision must be in place to curb GBV on women with disabilities. Mandatory inclusion of crime data on women with disabilities in the Annual NCRB Record.
4. Inter-ministerial coordination mechanism must be in place for addressing the issue of gender & disability, and empowerment of women with disabilities
5. Every review and monitoring process must include representation of WWDs, organisation working for/by disabled women, and other organisations working for disability & gender rights.
6. Alignment with all the UN conventions namely CRPD, CEDAW, CRC and other relevant Legislations of India – like RPWD Act 2016,

PWDVA 2005, SH Act 2013 etc. for realization of disability inclusion in a holistic manner to ensure gender equality for women & girls with disabilities.

7. Engaging civil society, CSOs, and other stakeholders in the disability and development dialogue/discourse helping them to improve understanding in inclusion and importance of mainstreaming women & girls with disabilities in particular and persons with disabilities in general

Let me conclude by saying that achieving gender equality and justice for Women with Disabilities is still far away. As feminists, as women rights activists or as disability rights activists we all have to be proactive and remain engaged with the state persistently. And I look forward to that as always!

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1. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/women-and-girls-with-disabilities/facts-and-figures>

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**Kuhu Das** founded the Association for Women with Disabilities (AWWD) in West Bengal, India in 2002 and is currently its Director with experience working on empowerment and mainstreaming of women with disabilities (WWD). Her work focuses on creating a strong platform through facilitating networks among WWD at all levels and capacity development of WWDs in leadership and advocacy so they can act as a collective voice. She has conducted leadership training at various levels in South Asian countries and India. Kuhu also has more than two decades of experience in disability, gender equality & women's empowerment issues and 10 years of project assessment and evaluation experience.

## **“Where There Was No Space for Me, I Created One: My Life Story”**

**Dr. Kiran Nayak B.**

I am Dr. Kiran Nayak, a 38-year-old Banjara tribal trans man from Warangal, Telangana, living with 75% polio disability since the age of three, with a wheelchair. I come from a Below Poverty Line (BPL) Dalit–Adivasi Banjara background, and my life journey has been defined by resilience in the face of deep structural exclusions based on caste, disability, gender identity, and poverty. I grew up in Hanuman Thanda, a small village in Telangana, immersed in the rich Banjara culture. At 12, I began identifying as male, despite being assigned female at birth. My life has been shaped by constant struggle, but also by a deep resilience that has carried me forward even in the darkest moments. Every phase of my journey and work in Karnataka—has demanded strength, courage, and a commitment to fight not only for myself but for others who face similar hardships.

In 2008, at the age of 18, I was forced to migrate to Chikaballapura, Karnataka because my life in Telangana had become extremely unsafe and unbearable. I was a young trans man facing intense personal, family, and social crises. At that time, I had married a girl I loved, and instead of accepting our relationship, my family, community, police, and society all turned against me. I experienced threats, harassment, and violence from every direction. Not a single person around me stood with me. As a trans man living with a disability, I had no support, no protection, and no space to live with dignity in my own state. The pressure became so severe that I had to make a life-or-death decision. I realised that if I stayed in

Telangana, I might not survive. During that critical period, a transgender organisation in Bengaluru came forward to support me. With their help, I left my home state and migrated to Karnataka—specifically to Chikaballapura district—seeking safety, identity, and a new beginning.

I arrived in Karnataka with nothing except my wheelchair and the hope that I could rebuild my life. Even here, life was not easy, but at least I had the freedom to exist. In Karnataka, I faced further struggles related to my gender identity, disability, and societal stigma. When I migrated to Karnataka as a young disabled trans man, my situation was extremely critical. I had no family support, no financial stability, and no acceptance from society. I was fighting my own identity battles while also facing physical barriers, discrimination, and hostility. Many times, survival itself felt uncertain. Over the years, I have survived five major life-threatening situations, but I am still here because of my resilience and my commitment to fight for the rights of marginalized communities. Migration was not my choice; it was my only way to stay alive. Karnataka became the place where I could restart my life, reclaim my identity, and continue my journey as a disability rights and transgender rights activist. As I began working in rural areas, especially with persons with disabilities (PWDs), I witnessed unbearable pain around me. I saw people with disabilities being isolated by their families, forced into marriages without consent, denied education, mobility, dignity, and harassed emotionally, financially, and socially.

These stories broke my heart. Every time I saw someone suffering, it reminded me of my own struggles. That pain became the fire behind my work. In my work—and in my personal journey—I face many major challenges that come from multiple directions: language barriers, education gaps, discrimination in jobs, gender identity issues, and accessibility barriers as a wheelchair user. Each of these struggles has shaped my path and influenced the way I work today.

1. **Language Barriers:** When I first came to Karnataka, I did not know Kannada. I had studied through Telugu-medium until my second year degree course, and because of my crisis, I had to stop my education. This made my work extremely difficult—communicating with local people, government officers, and community leaders became a daily struggle. Many times, I was ignored or not taken seriously simply because of language differences.

2. **Disruption of Education** - Due to my migration/crisis and survival struggles, I could not complete my degree. This affected my confidence and my opportunities. Without formal qualifications, many organisations did not consider me for jobs, even though I had strong leadership and field experience.

3. **Job Discrimination** - Finding employment as a disabled trans man was extremely difficult. I faced bias from employers, questions about my identity, confusion and rejection during document verification, no acceptance of my name change or gender transition, attitudes that doubted my abilities because I use a wheelchair. Many times, I was told directly: “We cannot give you a job.”

This was not because of a lack of skill—this was discrimination.

4. **Gender Identity & Documentation Issues** - As a trans man, getting official documents corrected—name, gender marker, ID proofs—was a long, painful process. Due to documentation mismatches, many organisations refused to hire me. Society also questioned and judged me as to who I am, why did I change my gender, and why my documents were different? These questions created daily barriers and emotional trauma.

5. **Accessibility Challenges as a Wheelchair User** - Public spaces, offices, rural areas, and government buildings are not accessible. My wheelchair became a barrier in many workplaces simply because there were no ramps, no accessible toilets, stairs everywhere, no inclusion mindset. People assumed that because I use a wheelchair, I cannot work—which is completely untrue. I also encountered a lack of support for trans men and very little understanding about trans men’s issues. Most systems, NGOs, and government programs focus only on trans women. As a trans man, I often felt invisible—no targeted support, no health services, no livelihood programs, no recognition. After facing rejection from many places, I finally received my first breakthrough and opportunity - a fellowship from Aneka Organisation, Bengaluru.

This fellowship became a turning point in my life. I am especially grateful to my mentor, Shubha Chacko, who believed in me, guided me, and helped me build my leadership. Without her support, I would not have reached where I am today. But even when I tried to help people, the local communities did not accept me easily. They questioned me again and again:

“Who are you?”

“Why did you come here?”

“Why are you taking up these cases?”

Many times, villagers responded with hostility and verbal violence. I faced discrimination from society, distrust from communities, and barriers from government officials. But I continued, because I knew that if I did not fight, no one else would stand up for these people.

At the same time, I was carrying my own battles inside. Being a trans man in a society that refuses to understand us pushed me to points of deep despair. There were four times in my life when I reached the edge of suicide. The loneliness, discrimination, and constant questioning of my identity made life feel unbearable. But each time, something in me refused to give up. I reminded myself: “My crisis should not become another person’s crisis. My pain should not be repeated in someone else’s life.”

That thought kept me alive. Even today, my life is not easy. I continue to face transphobia, ableism, political pressure, and social discrimination. I live with my wife, but we still face challenges every single day—uncertainty, financial instability, and social stigma. Many times, we do not know what the morrow will bring. That question remains in my heart: “Today I am here... but where will I be tomorrow?”

But despite everything, I continue to fight. I fight because I know what suffering feels like. I know the pain of being unwanted, unheard, unseen. And I want to build a world where nobody else has to experience that. Today, I continue to live and work in Karnataka, building a life of dignity while working for the rights of marginalized communities. My resilience comes from my struggles, and my struggles have become my strength. They have shaped my purpose: to ensure that no disabled person, no transgender person, no marginalized individual feels alone in their fight for dignity.

Despite severe barriers, I have dedicated my life to grassroots activism, focusing on disability rights, transgender rights, sanitation, and access to basic needs like safe drinking water. Today, I stand strong because of resilience, community support, and the belief that my fight will make life easier for those who come after me. The COVID-19 pandemic deepened vulnerabilities for disabled and transgender communities, but I worked tirelessly to mobilize and distribute relief aid to those most disenfranchised. For me, every single day is a fight. But I have learned that struggle alone is not enough—we also need awareness, education, courage, and collective strength. That is why I respond to these issues in many ways, both personally and through community leadership.

I continue to advocate for disability rights & accessibility – especially for wheelchair users, trans men’s recognition and rights in India, basic infrastructure needs such as sanitation and safe drinking water in marginalized regions.

1. Building “Second Literacy” – Awareness and Education - I believe that social change requires a second kind of literacy: literacy about rights, identities, gender, disability, and dignity. So I focus on educating people—PWD communities, transgender communities, rural youth, and families—so they understand their rights and stop believing harmful social norms.
2. Growing Community Leadership - Over time, many people have come forward because of my journey. Today, I work with volunteers from disability communities, women’s self-help groups, trans men and trans women groups as well as rural youth leaders. Many of them say, “If Kiran can fight, we can also fight.” Seeing others gain confidence gives me strength.

3. **Sharing My Life as a Tool for Strength** - Whenever people feel hopeless, I share examples from my own life—my migration struggle, discrimination, failures, suicide attempts, and recovery. I tell them: “Don’t give up. Don’t take your life. Your crisis is temporary. You are not alone.” My story becomes a source of hope for others facing similar battles.
4. **Crisis Counselling and Mental Health Support** - Every day, someone calls me for help—trans men, disabled persons, rural women, young LGBTQ+ students. Whenever there is a crisis, I respond immediately with strong emotional support, practical guidance, counselling, connecting them to networks and resources. Sometimes, I talk to people every minute during their crisis until they become stable. Saving lives has become a core part of my work.
5. **Training Colleges and Youth** - I regularly visit colleges and institutions to conduct sessions on gender, sexuality, inclusion, disability rights, and mental health. Through these workshops, I help young people unlearn discrimination and understand the realities of queer and disabled lives.
6. **Working with Local Government & Political Systems** - I constantly engage with local elected representatives, district officials, disability departments, social welfare offices, political leaders.

My goal is to create systemic change—not just help one person, but transform the structures that create these problems. Wherever discrimination happens, I challenge it. I file complaints, advocate, negotiate, and push for policy changes.

Finally, **Fighting Issues Daily with Collective Energy** - All the issues—transphobia, ableism, harassment, documentation problems, lack of accessibility—are not solved overnight. I face them every day, but I also take them up every day. That is why today so many people stand with me—because they have seen that I never run away from a fight.

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## Hypervisible, Yet Unseen

by Mridul

The year was 2003, I think. I was still in college and gave home tuitions after lectures to support myself in this big metro I had run away to. It was late at night but the bus I was in was unusually crowded. I was standing somewhere in the middle holding the back of a passenger seat. A woman gets up to leave from a ladies seat behind me, and some guy taps on my shoulder. As I turn around, he loudly announces “madam, baith jao” (madam, sit down).

Killing by kindness got a new meaning in my dictionary that day. Before I could even register the drop in my stomach, let alone process it, I noticed everyone within the earshot had turned their heads to give me wait, what? style second look.

This was way before I had undergone any medical transition and was still a couple years away from learning the terms transgender, trans man, dysphoria or passing. However, with my short hair, oversized men’s clothes, jugaad binding (even though this term itself didn’t exist in my vocabulary), short, chubby frame and a baby face, I often got clocked as a young boy. Not always, but a lot more often than not and that made me really happy. I didn’t know why, but that didn’t matter at the time. I even had a ready bank of rather conciliatory answers whenever someone questioned my appearance.

Why do you dress like a boy?

Oh, I have to travel late at night after tuitions and it keeps me safe.

Why do you not use makeup?

Oh, I have sensitive skin and get rashes.

... and many more.

There were many such experiences, but years later when I heard the phrase hypervisible as a gender failure, this bus ride rushed to mind.

In India, unless you have a supportive family or enough caste, class, education privilege to afford living in a high rise in a busy metro where your neighbors are too busy to care, your gender is more of a shared, negotiable, stratified part of your community than it is your personal identity. It’s constantly observed, guessed, commented on and corrected. No one really skips this monitoring, but if you were assigned female at birth (AFAB), it becomes part of the larger pattern of control that governs most aspects of your life – from food, mobility, and education to love, friendships and everything in between. That’s perhaps why the Western model of transness as an individual trajectory just doesn’t fit our landscape. Not everyone can afford privacy.

In some ways, and in some cases, gender non confirming AFAB persons are able to successfully negotiate wearing boys’ clothes, wearing their hair short, or wanting to play cricket with boys on the street when they are young. For AMAB persons, this scrutiny is a lot more severe and no amount of gender incongruence is considered acceptable. For AFAB folks too, the ride typically ends the moment puberty shows up. That’s when we are supposed to drop our tomboy avatar and become ‘proper’ women overnight – a role that we never trained for, that we don’t want to play and that goes against every fiber of our being. Any failure leads to reprimand, and every act of resistance is met with increasing amounts of violence right up to corrective rape and forced marriage – both of

which are as much trans\*<sup>1</sup> issues as they are issues affecting cis queer women.

Unsurprisingly, those of us who can, flee from homes the first chance we get. Some run away from their natal homes, others from marital. Some who have the means go away under the pretext of higher education or jobs and refuse to return. Some reach out to queer-trans collectives or NGOs for help running away – with their partners or by themselves. Many land up in nearby metros in hopes of getting a fresh start, away from the gender and caste surveillance of the families and communities they left behind. Easier said than done, unfortunately.

What this also means is that there's more nuance to dealing with caste and class privilege within the queer-trans context. While it's true that you carry parts of your caste privilege with you wherever you go – it's literally in your name – it's also true that once you run away, the ensuing kinship rupture does throw you out of your caste/familial networks and their resources. This is when many of us from privileged backgrounds also learn about the community resource aspect of our gender identities. For example, in my home tuition days, as I was learning to navigate negotiating my gender in crowded buses, sticky tables of cheap dhabas, and narrow, dimly lit lanes of low-rent, over-occupied PGs, I was surrounded by students from working class and vulnerable caste backgrounds. At times, probably out of infrastructural desperation, I did think that I had now become one of them. A thought that I am now ashamed to admit felt like a perfectly valid reason for self-pity at the time.

Now I know that this comparison was flawed on multiple fronts. My caste privilege was still working for me even then. First, this was only

a temporary reality for me. As soon as I started applying for jobs, I had options that my friends never did. Next, even back then, none of those rich, upper caste families who hired me would have opened their homes or treated me even half as well without this privilege. Or if I wasn't AFAB.

Even after all these years, it's still hard to express the irony of the situation – that I could become the man I am today because female home tutors for senior maths and physics were difficult to find. Not because there weren't female experts available, but because going to strangers' homes was not a safe job for them. That was (semi) strictly a man's job and now I wonder if that was one of the factors in me wanting to do it.

That's another unique thing about trans\* experiences in India. Our transition often starts before we even know what it means. Social transition generally happens before legal or medical – if at all the latter two happen. Migration to flee patriarchal violence becomes the first step. Many of us, especially those from working class backgrounds, leave homes, take factory, construction or other similar jobs, cut our hair and “become” men long before language like trans\* appears. In that sense, masculinity emerges through labor. Wearing male uniforms, sharing men's hostels, negotiating use of public/shared toilets, being addressed as anna/bhai/chhotu, staying out till late, learning to whistle – all become assertions of masculinity. But masculinity isn't learned only through work.

Like every other man on the planet, we, trans men, too learn masculinity from other men around us. From our fathers, brothers, and uncles to neighbors, bosses and movies. We try to emulate what we are told are masculine traits. Sometimes in an effort to pass to be safe, other times as a

way to assert our gender in the face of everyday misgendering. Granted not every trait we pick is useful or even harmless, but engagement with this needs a carefully considered approach. One that acknowledges the precarity of our circumstances, accounts for lack of awareness, makes room for our local, regional and communal influences, and questions its own assumptions about what's actually problematic vs just unacceptable in elite, savarna, English-speaking spaces.

One of the things that the queer-trans feminist spaces I have been fortunate enough to be a part of have taught me is that it is possible to critique the ills of patriarchy without making a villain out of masculinity itself. Besides, masculinity, like femininity, is just a social label for your gender expression anyway. An expression that's as much socially constructed as it is individually calibrated. Given the control patriarchy, casteism, and capitalism have over every aspect of our social fabric, both femininity and masculinity are equally susceptible to furthering the cause through oppression, violence, and forced hierarchies. One might argue that even as agents of the cause, power distribution is unequal along gender lines, and that's true. However, intersectional politics teaches us that's not the only axis of inequality.

Everyone – no matter what their location is – wields power over those that fall below them in the hierarchy. It's a behaviour that's so commonplace that it renders itself invisible even in spaces meant to question it. For example, even though casteism exists everywhere and is often the underlying common denominator between reports we hear of police brutality, mob lynchings, or language vigilante attacks, it somehow doesn't become the central theme we rally around.

The unsavory traits that we have all come to associate with masculinity, like aggression,

oppression, entitlement, incessant capture of spaces and resources, should most definitely get criticised and questioned, but the conflation between these traits and masculinity itself ends up excluding trans masculine voices from the feminist discourse.

Blanket statements about complex phenomena like privilege or power in a society as multi-faceted as ours are rarely helpful. In any situation, the limits of your power and privilege are defined and redefined by where you stand vis-à-vis those around you in not just one, but every aspect of your social location – including, but not limited to, caste, class, geography, education, religion, and of course, (perceived) gender. The violent tactics of asserting this power that we are all familiar with are unfortunately hard-coded into this hierarchy itself.

With that in mind, I do, however, think that there is a fundamental difference between how cis and trans men experience masculinity and the privilege that comes along with it. For cis men, it could be about thoughtless assertion of power caused by flawed social conditioning but for trans men, it's often about acceptance, survival, aspiration and self-determination. The behavior might look similar from outside, but the underlying foundations couldn't be more different.

None of this is to say that feminist spaces need to silently suffer through the toxicity of patriarchal behaviors just because someone is trans\*. Such behavior can and should be challenged as long as that dialogue comes from a place of empathy, understanding, and acknowledgement of our lived realities. It can't be built on the flawed foundation of treating masculinity as uniformly oppressive. Patriarchy is still very much the enemy but perhaps we can stop relying on a neat story of it created by binary gender categories.

It's not a novel concept either. Time and again we have seen that those of us who are fortunate (or should I say privileged?) enough to find spaces that enable them to engage with feminism inclusively are able to craft their own version of masculinity. One that identifies gender based violence and inequalities, recognizes privilege, and is confident enough to reject socially mandated gender norms. The kind of confidence that comes from knowing that you have a place you can belong to. A place safe enough for you to be who you are, to ask stupid questions, make mistakes, learn, engage and evolve. A place where you are not an outsider, but very much a part of the discourse.

Unfortunately, in reality, many cis-het dominant feminist spaces either do not want to, or find themselves unable to engage with trans\* masculinity in constructive ways. Whether it's because of a general disdain for masculinity itself, lack of awareness about our lived realities and issues, a notion of betrayal about us joining the enemy, or the broader frameworks they follow that center around a set political category of woman, we often find ourselves on the margins of this discourse as well. We are either not invited at all, or if we are, it feels more as a token, a checkbox than an equal stakeholder; as someone to be taken less seriously than the 'real' participants. The conversations find ways to conveniently ignore our needs and it is left to us to either find the courage to speak up or quietly invent ways to somehow fit ourselves into the narrative.

I understand that this might not be intentional. In a country where access and spaces for even the largest minority (cis women) are shrinking almost every day, especially after all the work the feminist movement has already put into it for decades, it's perhaps natural for one's attention and intention to get focused on that first and everything else

gets slotted for later. Perhaps, that's where a revised approach is required.

I realize now that the 'wait, what?' look I got on that bus wasn't just confusion; it was a system glitch. It revealed the cracks in the same patriarchal machinery that governs us all. The forces that police my gender – familial surveillance, medical gatekeeping, ableist institutions, the demand for question-less compliance – are the exact same forces that restrict your autonomy too.

That is why our coalitions must now move beyond identities. Integrating trans\* experiences isn't just an act of inclusion anymore – it is a strategic necessity. Our lives expose the gears of the system we are all fighting against. We are not simply another intersection to be layered on top of existing frameworks, but a new paradigm in itself – one that challenges the essence of how we see gender in the first place.

## End notes:

1. trans\* is an all-inclusive term referring to individuals who challenge the binary notion of gender as well as assigned gender at birth.

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**Mridul** is a trans man who has been involved with queer-trans community spaces in Mumbai and across India for over a decade and a half. He is currently part of Hasrat-e-Zindagi Mamuli, a Mumbai-based queer-trans collective. He works as a freelance technologist at the intersection of accessibility, privacy, and people-centered design. Applying a coder's lens to the 'source code' of gender, he is committed to making systems - digital and social - more accountable to lived realities. He can be found as @exitCodeNone on most social media platforms.

## Finding My Voice

Priyanka Neogi<sup>1</sup>

I am a self-advocate for persons with intellectual disability. I am 30 years old and am working at the vocational unit of Mentaaid, an educational, vocational training, and cultural institution for the development of mentally challenged children and adults in Kolkata. I am also the President of the West Bengal chapter of SAFI – Self Advocate Forum of India. My work is to spread awareness about persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This is because persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities often face a lot of stigma and discrimination from people around them. Today I want to talk of one such recent incident. In September 2025 I went to Bhubaneswar from Kolkata to attend a training on Sexuality and Women with Disabilities. There were 4 other women with disabilities from Bengal whom I know from previous workshops and we took the train from Shalimar station. I was the only one with intellectual disability. I have known these women for the last 3 years and have participated in workshops with them. In fact, my mother gave permission for me to go only because they were going and they are known to my family.

In the train I was segregated from the rest of the group. Four of the berths had been assigned in one cluster and I was asked to sleep on a berth which was far from theirs. It was an overnight journey and I was very scared all alone. When I asked one of them to accompany me to the washroom of the train, they refused to come with me. I sat for a long time trying to control myself but then went by myself, when the urge to go

became unbearable. I had a difficult night being on my own. This was my first trip without my parents or staff of the organisation where I work. I was the only woman in the 6-berth section, which was also very terrifying.

When we reached Bhubaneswar in the morning and checked into the hotel, I was assigned a room on the 4th floor separate from all the other women from Bengal. I repeatedly requested them to allow me to stay with them as I cannot speak any other language. But the others refused to let me stay with them and pushed me into a room where I was forced to stay in the room on the 4th floor all by myself for that night. I was afraid as I did not know the other people on the floor and most of them were men. I called my mother who asked me to lock the room from inside and not to go out. The next day, another participant from Chhattisgarh joined me, but she could speak only Hindi. I felt so lonely and uncomfortable there.

During the days of the workshop, we learnt about many things, from understanding disability, to understanding our bodies, from learning about sexuality and disability to sexual and other forms of abuse of women with disabilities. I started thinking about my experiences and felt that I had been subjected to stigma by these other women. We are all disabled women but because I have intellectual disability, because I take more time to understand, they kept me separate from them. They think that as I am slow, I cannot understand that they are segregating me. This experience left me traumatised and fearful.

However, during the 3-day workshop I also tried to speak with the different trainers and communicated to them about the experience I had in the train and in the hotel. I wanted them to understand that I was being marginalised even within the group. The trainers were sensitive and they immediately took steps to ensure that I did not feel alone or separated from the group. They explained to the other girls and women who also understood the situation. I am glad I could speak clearly about the discrimination to others. This experience has made me stronger as an advocate.

## End note

1. In conversation with Nandini Ghosh

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**Priyanka Neogi**, a young woman at Mentaïd, has not let cerebral palsy and intellectual disability come in the way of leading with confidence, “Aastha”, the self advocacy group of Mentaïd and as the President of Self Advocates Forum of India, West Bengal network, championing for Rights. She received the State Government Role Model Award in 2024.

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## **The Lectern Killjoy: On Unmasking Masculinity as A Queer-Crip Academic**

**Dr. Ishan Chakraborty**

If I tell you that I'm an upper-caste, Kolkata-born-and-brought-up, financially independent male faculty member in the Department of English at a state university in West Bengal, you immediately see someone in the sites of material capital and discursive power. I know that these identities allow me to negotiate my surroundings effectively and generally to my advantage.

However, when I add two more vertices to that matrix—gay and deafblind—the entire figure changes. While being a gay faculty member in a premier state university, particularly in a department teaching Many Feminisms, Queer Studies, or Cultures of Protest, might seem more acceptable in 2025, the addition of deafblindness immediately challenges the positions of power conferred by my masculinity, financial independence, and upper-caste existence.

In addition, the visible performance that comes with queerness is severely challenged by my deafblindness. How does a deafblind person participate in a queer politics largely dependent on and dominated by visual culture? How does a deafblind person perform and assert their queer identity, and where do they fit within a queer community where queerness is still defined by visuo-centric (or ocular-centric) “norms” of queer performance?

If, as a deafblind person, I am dependent on someone—in my case, my mother—who may not understand or may not want to approve of my queer dressing up, my mediated dress/visual

presentation may not be as “queer” as I would want it to be (or perceive it to be), to “pass as queer enough.” Here, the language of English gives me significant power and allows me to navigate certain spaces where people have the cultural capital to accept differences. Yet, my deafblindness and my queerness invariably relegate me to a section that is “two out of the box.” Not only am I dealing with multiple disabilities, but I am also adding my queer identity to it.

When I was a student in one of these universities, I was never able to come out publicly as queer, though some very close friends knew my sexual preference. What is more, although I was partially deaf, I always tried to pass only as a singly disabled person, as seeking help as a person with multiple disabilities would have meant putting “too much burden” on my friends, teachers, and acquaintances. Given the poor acoustics often found in public institutions in India, I was often unable to hear lectures distinctly but would never “dare” to speak up and let the teacher know. Since I am blind, lip-reading was not an option. I could never gather the courage to request/ask my teacher to read out words and phrases or spellings written on the whiteboard. I always had to wait for my classmates to furnish me with the details, and I felt quite embarrassed to overwhelm them if the details were too many.

During those student days, seeing my friends come out openly as gay, queer, or non-binary—and to my surprise at the time, even finding partners—always added a layer of anxiety and shame to my

own ability to assert myself. I constantly worried that even if I came out, I would never get a partner because of my disability, making me undesirable, and consequently, “not queer enough.” This fear always stopped me from asserting my queerness, and my focus remained almost entirely on my visual disability.

Now that I am on the other side of the table, teaching for over eight years, the challenges have shifted. When I first joined my department, I was consumed by an internalized anxiety to assert my position and power, specifically my “command” over the classroom. As a blind person, how could I command respect and be friendly with newly adult students while maintaining the authority expected of a faculty member? This anxiety haunted my initial years. We are often conditioned to believe that a “respected man” should assert power through a confident, almost aggressive tone, and perform a certain masculinity, which is largely dictated by robustness and overachievements—being distant and not overly emotional, and demonstrating “swag,” as if being understanding and empathetic is less masculine. I learned this from my extended family, school, and society, or what we, the academics, would want to put as “Ideological State Apparatus.” I was initially anxious that my students would take advantage of my blindness, and I was constantly worried about losing “control” of the class. It is important to understand that as a deafblind person, I have had very little control over things directly related to my life—from financial matters and paper formalities to the choice of my dress, always depending on others’ choices, tastes, and suggestions. This created an internalized desire to take things under my own control within the professional sphere.

When I began teaching Disability Studies, which included a module on gender, it was primarily

Feminist Disability Studies. Initially, I had no awareness or even courage of incorporating the idea of Crip, which encompasses queerness and disability, meaning I felt subjected to self-censorship regarding my queer embodiment. However, with the passage of time, as I grew as a researcher and academic, becoming increasingly exposed to the intersections of disability, and starting to read, write, and think about queer disabled voices and narratives, my confidence grew. I gradually began to accept myself as an “effeminate” gay deafblind person. I gradually realized that ultimately, the main difficulty lay not so much in waiting for whether other people would accept me, but in accepting my own intersecting identity and allowing that confidence to manifest.

In the academic physical space, where inaccessibility is the norm—where a person with visual disability is compelled to negotiate with and adjust to printed copies, all kinds of inaccessible technology and logistics, and inaccessible official documents; and where cumbersome activities like correcting answer scripts are carried out—how much time or energy or even headspace is one left with to invest in exploring and focusing on their queer identity? The ubiquitous conditions of inaccessibility owing to the incessant interactions between the barriers and his disability regularly scratch at him, leaving him with little mental energy to assert, talk about, discuss, and focus on the assertion of his queerness, which does not pose an everyday challenge or put up every-minute barriers like those caused by his disability.

Many colleagues of mine who are disabled and identify themselves as queer, working in non-urban colleges and universities (the mufassil or rural areas), have often confided in me, sharing the fact that they have never been able to gather the courage to come out openly about their

identity, their same-sex attraction, or their non-binary gender identity/non-conformity to binary gender positions. While they have strongly felt the need and the urge to do so in order to be more comfortable with their surroundings, they have consequently often faced very unwelcoming and triggering questions and comments from colleagues regarding their singlehood, their unmarried status or their “effeminacy”. It is also to be kept in mind that they have repeatedly mentioned to me that since their workplaces are in rural areas, the level of understanding, awareness, and empathetic sensitivity about queerness and same-sex attraction or non-conformity is often misunderstood, missing, or lacking compared to universities and colleges in the urban space. They have also mentioned that by way of dealing with such inaccessibility in the workplace—such as inaccessible official paperwork, being compelled to use significantly inaccessible technology, handling logistics riddled with barriers, and working in staff rooms where heteronormativity and ableist expectations are the norms—they have always felt the pressure or the exigency of focusing more, even exclusively, on their disability and disabled identity. This is because their disability poses every day, realistic, and direct challenges associated with their profession and their livelihood. They have never had the “leisure” or the chance opportunity of talking about their queerness. It is almost as if their entire focal energy, the energy of their focus and headspace, has been exhausted by concentrating on their disability and trying hard to adjust to an environment that is non-conducive and full of mental, emotional, and infrastructural barriers.

Returning to my workplace: in our department, we have a gender-neutral toilet, which is a significant step forward towards inclusion. However, it must be pointed out that the toilet is not entirely

accessible. A wheelchair will be able to pass through the main door, but that is not enough to make a washroom entirely accessible. However, as a visually disabled person, I have never had any problem or issues in accessing the washroom; in that sense, the washroom is also quite accessible to a blind person.

When queer events or queer festivals are organized in the university or in the department, I usually attempt to stay away from them. Otherwise, I feel quite left out, as I have already mentioned that since queerness is still so dependent on visual performance, I feel quite isolated. I feel that I am not being able to participate efficiently, adequately, or fully in that space, and in turn, I feel that my very presence in that queer space almost functions as a killjoy. This might not be true, but this has been my emotional reaction, my internal feelings. What is more, it is today that I am writing and talking about this feeling of mine so openly, but I have never been able to talk about this freely and openly with the organizers of such events.

Again, the same issue of internalized ableism has led me to always feel that it would be too overwhelming, it would be asking for too much if I interact with the event organizers and talk to them about making the event accessible and as barrier-free as possible. Theoretically, these are issues which I discuss in the class as a part of the syllabus, and this is something which very recently I have been able to do. But I am yet to be so confident that I am able to discuss and bring on to the table my access needs—the access needs of disabled persons—even in a queer event.

Again, queer film screening, which often becomes an important occasion for queer persons to socialize and interact with each other, has largely remained inaccessible to me. The queer films

which have been screened either in our department or in the university have never been accompanied with audio descriptions, thereby rendering the entire screening process quite meaningless and disconnected for me. I have therefore repeatedly lost opportunities to mingle with, to socialize with, to know, and to be known in the queer circles of my academic space.

Whenever I am invited to deliver lectures or whenever I am asked to submit write-ups or articles in the field of academia, almost always the focus has been on my disability—my understanding of disability, my experiences with disability, representation of disability, and matters related to disability. I have almost never been asked to talk about the intersecting identities of disability with other forms of identities. Academia in India still has a long way to go to make adequate room and space for multiple voices or for intersecting identities. Marginality studies—that is to say, to be specific, the commodification of single-axis marginality is currently prioritized. However, the moment it comes to intersection, there seems either a lack of understanding or a lack of interest in translating the theoretical understanding into everyday practice.

It is also a point which I would want to take a note of: how academics in India in general is dictated

by ableism, because disabled faculty members and academics are “expected to” and “needed to” perform and turn out papers, projects, and presentations as frequently and as prolific a manner as any other non-disabled person, without giving them adequate support, without meeting their access needs, and without giving them a conducive environment. What I mean to say is, the environment remains inaccessible to disabled persons, but the production that they are expected to produce, the amount that they are expected to deliver, the deliverables expected from them are as high as those expected from a non-disabled person. Therefore, an equitable working space and a fair playing ground are not given. The starting point remains structurally inequitable, sustained by ableist institutional inertia.

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## **Not stable enough? Autonomy under scrutiny**

**Neeraj Kumar**

Over the past decade, transgender and gender diverse (TGD) rights in India have moved from the margins of public discourses to a more visible position with legal, policy, and health governance frameworks. Landmark judicial decisions such as *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* (2014) affirmed the right to self-identified gender and recognized transgender persons as a third gender<sup>1</sup>. This was followed by legislative enactment including the *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019*, which mandates non-discrimination in healthcare and directs governments to provide gender-affirming services in public hospitals<sup>2</sup>. These developments have been widely described as progressive shifts in Indian jurisprudence and policy (Jain, 2022). However, the translation of formal recognition into substantive rights-based access to healthcare remains uneven, particularly for TGD persons living with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities.

In August 2024, pursuant to its obligation under the *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019*, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of the Government of India released Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the medical treatment of transgender persons (Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, 2024)<sup>3</sup>. While framed as a step toward standardization and improved access, the SOPs institutionalise a psychiatric gatekeeping model. They require a certificate of “gender incongruence” (GI) from a psychiatrist prior to initiating hormone replacement therapy, and for gender-affirming surgeries, certification from two mental health professionals (MHPs) (a psychiatrist and a clinical

psychologist). Furthermore, the SOPs stipulate that the individual must be “psychologically stable” and free from psychosis, depression, alcoholism, or intellectual disability before surgical intervention.

These provisions raise serious concerns when examined through the lens of disability right law and international human right standards. The *Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016* (RPwD Act, 2016) recognizes all persons with disabilities entitled to the right to equality, non-discrimination and full legal capacity. Section 25 of RPwD Act 2016 imposes a positive obligation on the state to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy the highest attainable standard of health without discrimination. The provision mandates that appropriate government and healthcare institutions, both public and private provide disability-sensitive services such as priority in attendance and treatment, and ensure access to all facilities, services, and equipment without any accessible hurdle. Section 25 (2) (k) particularly looks into the sexual and reproductive healthcare especially for women with disabilities. India is also a state party to the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD), which obligates the government to respect the inherent dignity, autonomy, and legal capacity of persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others. Article 25 of the CRPD obligates states to provide access to health without discrimination and in the same range as provided to others without disability. Article 25(f) explicitly mandates that states prevent discriminatory denial of healthcare or health services, as well as food and fluids on the

basis of disability. Provision of RPwD Act 2016 and UNCRPD underscores that disability cannot constitute a ground for restricting, withholding, or conditional access to medical treatment. Instead, states are obligated to adopt affirmative measures to ensure substantive equality in health systems. In this light the Indian SOPs are in direct tension with domestic law and international commitments, effectively reintroducing disability based barriers to care.

The International standards of care have increasingly moved towards informed consent models and depathologization. The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) Standards of Care Version 8 (SOC-8) emphasizes respect for self determination and caution against unnecessary mental health gatekeeping (Coleman et al., 2022). While WPATH acknowledges that mental health comorbidities may require concurrent support, it does not endorse blanket exclusion of individuals with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities from gender affirming interventions (pp. 62, 171-172). The guidelines clarify that any healthcare practitioner with adequate competence in assessing GI and providing gender affirming care may conduct assessment of GI, they do not require the routine involvement of psychiatrist, psychologist, or social workers in each assessment (p. 34). The Indian SOPs, by contrast, appear to impose categorical exclusions based on diagnostic labels rather than functional assessment of decision making ability or supported decision making frameworks. Crucially, WPATH guidelines reject the presumption that the presence of severe mental illness automatically negates an individual's capacity to provide informed consent (p. 172). The document affirms that decisional capacity is task specific

and must be evaluated in relation to a particular intervention, not inferred solely from diagnostic status (Ibid). Therefore living with psychosocial disabilities does not in itself establish an inability to understand risk, benefits, and alternatives. Instead, clinicians are encouraged to provide additional appropriate support. It further states that presence of anxiety or depressive symptoms should function as automatic barriers to accessing gender affirming medical treatment (Ibid). With respect to perioperative care, disability status may shape surgical planning and recovery. The recommended response is not categorical denial but enhanced attention to support, continuity of care, and social support systems (Ibid). Where active symptoms of mental illness are present clinicians are advised to coordinate appropriate psychiatric and surgical follow up rather than suspend access altogether (Ibid).

In a study by Ranade et al. (2025) with 165 MHPs across Mumbai, Delhi, and Bengaluru, forefront everyday clinical encounters for GI certificates are structured by pathologizing assumptions and binary gender norms. Rather than functioning as facilitators of care, many MHPs assume a gatekeeping role, position themselves as arbiters of authenticity who must verify the legitimacy of a person's gender identity before providing GI certification. Nearly half of the MHPs (47%) reported being approached for referral letters commonly referred to in practice as "GID<sup>4</sup> certificates", a term that reflects older diagnostic nomenclature. This framing transforms assessment into a quasi forensic exercise in determining whether a client qualifies as a real transgender person. In pursuit of such authenticity some practitioners reported extending inquiries beyond psychosocial evaluation to include anatomical details, intelligence assessments,

and judgement regarding a client's ability to pass within normative gender expectations. In certain instances MHPs described conducting physical or genital examination and ascertaining consent from family members even if TGD person was adult. Despite international standards indicating that formal psychological testing is not routinely required for access to hormone therapy or surgery, the majority of MHPs reported administering projective, and personality tests in some cases even IQ tests. These practices lack a robust evidence base and reproduce stigma under the guise of clinical prudence. For TGD persons with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities such scrutiny can be intensified as disability is often conflated with incompetence.

The requirement that a person be psychologically stable warrants scrutiny. Depression and anxiety are disproportionately prevalent among TGD individuals, largely due to minority stress, and discrimination and social exclusion (Meyer, 2003). Numerous studies internationally and nationally have demonstrated that access to gender affirming care is associated with improved mental health, including reductions in depression and suicidality (Aldridge et al., 2020). To require the absence of depression as a precondition for accessing care that may alleviate that very distress risks creating a circular barrier. For individuals with psychosocial disabilities, the expectation of complete symptom remission before surgery may function as a permanent exclusion and hiding of the symptoms. Practitioners frequently justified these measures as safeguards to establish stability and assess capacity. This regulatory framework revives longstanding debates around capacity and competence. The concept of capacity has historically been used to justify substitute decision making and institutionalization of persons with

psychosocial or intellectual disabilities. The UNCRPD and RPwd Act 2016 advocates for a paradigm shift from substitute decision making to supported decision making recognizing that all persons have capacity and may require varying levels of support to exercise it. By contrast the Indian SOPs appear to rely on a status based model in which certain diagnoses automatically disqualify individuals from autonomous healthcare decisions. This approach undermines the principle that disability alone cannot be grounds for denying capacity. The cumulative effect of these standards is that many TGD with psychosocial disabilities are placed in an untenable position. Faced with intrusive evaluation and the risk of denial some may conceal symptoms or present a narrative tailored to perceived clinical expectations (Ranade et al. 2025, p. 7). Kattari et al. (2016) argues that trust centered affirming relationships between TGD persons and their healthcare practitioners have been known to reduce emotional distress and improve well being. The approach of Indian SOPs aligns with status based exclusions and violates the rights of TGD persons with psychosocial disabilities.

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## **The story of curating an inclusive art exhibition in India: Access learnings**

**Dr. Shubha Ranganathan**

The idea of curating an accessible and inclusive exhibition first came to me in April 2024, when I visited an art exhibition in Hyderabad that was titled 'Inclusive Art Exhibition'. As a person who enjoys visiting creative exhibitions and gallery spaces, and an academic who has been working on questions of marginality, disability, and non-normativity, I was curious to understand what the organizers meant by referring to the exhibition as 'inclusive', especially since there was mention of the involvement of 'disabled artists'. With great curiosity and eagerness, I attended the exhibition, which was organized by a small NGO working on issues of disability in an urban slum locality. Some months later, in August 2024, I attended a similar exhibition in Bengaluru.

What I witnessed over the two exhibitions left me with mixed feelings. This was the first time I encountered the use of audio description in India for making museum or art exhibits accessible for persons with visual impairments. That was a refreshing and learning experience. It was also wonderful to encounter the artists in the gallery itself, engaging with viewers. For many of them, it was their first experience displaying their art in a gallery. I was also gratified to see disability issues being brought to public attention.

At the same time, there were lingering questions about how 'inclusion' and 'access' were imagined. Does 'inclusion' only mean the inclusion of persons with disabilities? What about concerted efforts to bring in varied experiences of marginality and non-normativity? And what

about other forms of access beyond the use of audio descriptions? In general, how were disability and marginality being represented? How can participants – artists, viewers, organizers – be more actively involved in the process of putting together the exhibition? These were just some of the questions with which I embarked on the idea of curating an exhibition that did more than just acquire artworks and hang them up on the walls. I began to wonder: what does it mean to put together an 'inclusive art exhibition'? What are the mechanics of enabling 'access' at all levels? And how can inclusivity be built into art spaces from the beginning? Building from Amanda Cachia's (2023) point about the need for thinking about access as an integral aspect of art spaces and exhibition, and not just an added feature that is 'tacked on' at the end, and drawing inspiration from Arseli Dokumaci's (2018) illustration of how disability can be approached as method, I decided to learn about access and inclusion through the practical process of making – or at least, attempting to make – them happen. Our endeavour was to treat(s) access as an open-ended process, a negotiation, and an intersectional and multimodal issue, rather than an easily achievable end point (Hamraie, 2021, p. 456).

With this in mind, Accessible Aesthetics was conceived. Our core aim was twofold: one, ensuring accessibility in the space of the exhibition, and two, building inclusivity into the exhibition at different levels. Our first step was to solicit entries from participants. Here, we made concerted efforts to circulate the brochure among

varied institutions, organizations, and networks, so that participants with diverse experiences of non-normativity would be involved. This included queer-trans people, as well as people with experiences of neurodivergence. Recognizing that lived experiences of disability, queerness, and neurodivergence often went together (see, e.g. Yergeau, 2017; Price, 2022; Walker, 2021), we believed that the exhibition would not be truly inclusive if it did not involve engagement with all of these communities. At the same time, ‘involvement’, for us, did not just mean sending in an entry and registering; we also reflected how we could engage with the artists at a deeper level, particularly about their experiences of exclusion and accessibility in art and museum spaces. We wondered: as disabled, queer, neurodivergent artists, what were their own experiences of uninhabitable art galleries and being an artist in an ableist world? What insights about crippling art and museum spaces could be discerned from deep conversations with them?

To further a deeper understanding of these questions, we embarked on a research study connected with the exhibition. In doing this, our intention was to directly bridge the worlds of academia, praxis, and advocacy, where interview conversations with artists directly fed into Accessible Aesthetics. I remember a striking conversation with a queer-trans disabled artist who had a background in architecture and design, and had prior experience with curating an exhibition that centered on the theme of rest. In setting up the interview, I expected to learn more about the use of resting spaces and quiet spaces in exhibitions (which was something that we ensured by marking out quiet spaces in the gallery and having several chairs and a wheelchair available on standby for anyone to use). However,

this conversation was about so much more than the mechanics of inclusion and access. We asked them about their understanding of ‘inclusion’ in the context of art and their responses made us sit up and rethink taken-for-granted assumptions. For them, hearing the words ‘inclusion’ or ‘inclusive’ actually made them a little mad because it suggested a particular (additional) effort to make something ‘inclusive’. “Why does it have to be an extra effort?” they asked. “Why is it (always) a special need or an additional requirement? Why can’t it just be a generic thing, a given, that can be taken for granted in all contexts?” This was also the kind of response they had when they heard the phrase ‘designing for disability’ – that, shouldn’t designing for disability always be a norm? Hidden behind such terms were assumptions about what they pointedly referred to as “the threshold of able-bodiedness”.

When talking about building access into curation, they remarked that access was not just confined to gallery spaces and the accessibility of artworks; it was not just about access in the built environment (Hamraie, 2017), but was about the entire process. We talked about how access was also very much about work processes and cultures. As they pointed out, how mindful are we about impinging on the time of others, or putting too much pressure on them to get things done at the last moment due to poor planning? Are we making it explicit in our communication that we do NOT expect others to follow our work schedules? When we go into overdrive mode in the days just before an exhibition, expecting workers to stay back in the evenings to put up exhibits, what about the worker who needs to take a particular bus to get home in time? What about the labour of artisans and workers for creating decals, or other aspects of the exhibition? Are

we making sure that the physical structures in the gallery spaces are stable enough to ensure safety and that no accidents take place? Have we provided as much and detailed information as possible about the venue to visitors? Have we sufficiently accounted for unexpected circumstances like illness etc. that may slow down the process? Can we find ways to build care webs and dream collectively towards alternative futures (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018) through the conversations sparked by the process of exhibition-making? Putting up an inclusive and accessible exhibition is not just about one event or exhibit; it is fundamentally about consciously engaging with questions of power and privilege and bringing in cultures of rest and slowness into our projects and relationships. Tellingly, some of our exhibits from disabled and queer-trans artists contemplated on themes of rest, fatigue, and relaxation!

Another series of interactions with a wheelchair using artist helped us realize that ‘access’ is not an issue to be ‘fixed’, once and for all, but an ongoing process that is negotiated, “a process rooted in critique and a sense that the world can and should be otherwise” (Friedner, 2025, p. 167). Having made it a point to connect with the disabled artists beforehand about their access needs, we checked in with this wheelchair-user as well. We soon realized that neither was there an accessible or gender-neutral toilet in the gallery building, nor was the washroom space wheelchair-accessible. This sparked conversations among us to determine what could be done in these circumstances, to make the washrooms wheelchair-accessible and gender-neutral. One student volunteer majoring in design, with a flair for carpentry, considered building a ramp. However, we soon realized that this would still not work as the doorway to the men’s washroom was too narrow for his wheelchair to fit in. Another student suggested renting a convertible toilet

seat. I pointed out that instead of coming up with technological solutions on our own, we could go back to the wheelchair-user and get ideas from him. After all, he was sure to have encountered similar situations in the past! It turned out that he was extremely familiar with the absence of accessible toilets, and said that what could really make a difference is the presence of volunteers who could assist him at the venue.

With that began a set of volunteer trainings by a professional in disability assistance, with whom we worked. Interestingly, volunteer support became a crucial aspect of the exhibition, as we realized that this could serve as one crucial workaround for limitations in access. This also points to the very different and specific requirements that stem from the Indian context, where, in many cases, access is not a given, and has to be orchestrated through informal mechanisms such as care relations and networks rather than formal or technological mechanisms. I am reminded here of a conversation with a disability studies scholar from the US remarking on the huge role of volunteer support in making access happen in India. Despite being an anthropologist who has researched disability in India, she was surprised at the way in which friends, family members, and informal networks played such a central role in Indian educational institutions, unlike US universities where disabled students would turn to formal mechanisms such as those provided by disability services. Conversations in critical access studies tend to be dominated by global North contexts (see e.g. Hamraie, 2017), with little attention to how global South contexts might generate very different ways of doing access.

Returning to the wheelchair-using artist, our engagement with him was not just limited to a conversation about access needs, as if disabled

persons are always only the recipients of support. As disabled artists, we wanted to engage with them, both as artists, and as persons with disability expertise (Hartblay, 2020). The day before the exhibition, when the artworks were being put up, we worked with the wheelchair-user on the site to determine the height at which the wall art should be hung. One common feature of inaccessibility at art galleries is the fact that exhibits are often displayed at a height presuming a standing viewer, and we wanted to avoid the same.

All this is not to state that we had no limitations, or competing access needs or access clashes to wrestle with. One challenge emerged from the fact that we wanted to use the gallery space creatively for interactive workshops and pedagogical activities. This raised a conundrum for us: typically, art gallery spaces place a tremendous amount of emphasis on silence, but what if the gallery was not just a (quiet) viewing space but also an interactive space, with workshops and involving children? Would our venue become too chaotic, messy, and possibly overwhelming for neurodivergent folks? How do we balance the competing access needs in such cases? Although we did come up with some workarounds, by limiting the workshops to specific times in the day and earmarking quiet spaces around the gallery, there are no easy solutions. Limitations in access remained; aspects of access remained inaccessible (Robinson, Carew, & Groce, 2024). We could not create a gender-neutral washroom in the gallery due to structural reasons in the built space of the gallery. And while we acknowledged our limitation with an apologetic sign reading ‘sorry, we don’t have a gender-neutral washroom’, it remained, nevertheless, an access limitation.

It is here that one is reminded that access is never a finite process but one that will somehow always be

incomplete, because it aspires towards alternative futures and inhabitable worlds (Friedner & Cohen, 2015). As Friedner (2025) points out, “Is access ever a finished outcome? Or is it an ever-moving horizon, something toward which we work...” (p. 171). For me, this entire process of curating an accessible exhibition is just the beginning of a journey in learning about the complexity of access and inclusion.

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## Reports from the Workshops, Seminars and Conferences organized by the Regional Committees of the IAWS

### IAWS Mid-Eastern Regional Conference 2024

The Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS) organised its inaugural Mid-Eastern Regional Conference on 29–30 November 2024 at Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee University (DSPMU), Ranchi, Jharkhand. Convened by the IAWS Mid-Eastern Regional Committee in collaboration with DSPMU, Ranchi, and Gurunanak College, Dhanbad, the conference was organised on the theme “Gender and Marginalisation in Mid-Eastern India: Experiences from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Bihar.” The conference sought to draw attention to the relative neglect of the Mid-Eastern region in academic research and policy discourse, particularly with respect to gender concerns. The region—comprising Jharkhand, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh—is marked by the coexistence of development and underdevelopment. The discussions foregrounded the need for a gendered reading of marginalisation and ‘(under) development’, especially in view of the critical role played by women from marginalised communities in sustaining households and livelihoods.

The conference commenced with the Inaugural Session, which set the tone for two days of sustained engagement with questions of gender and marginalisation in the Mid-Eastern region. Ms Amita Kumari, Coordinator, IAWS Mid-Eastern Regional Committee, presented the opening remarks, outlining the objectives of the newly constituted regional committee. She also underscored the importance of creating a sustained academic platform for feminist

scholarship in Jharkhand, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh. The Keynote Address was delivered by Prof. Harishwar Dayal, Member of Jharkhand Finance Commission. He reflected on the patterns of migration and development in the region, foregrounding their gendered dimensions. He also highlighted the disproportionate burdens borne by women in contexts of economic precarity, displacement, and labour mobility. The session was chaired by Prof. Tapan Kumar Sandilya, the Vice-Chancellor of Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee University who emphasised the role of universities in supporting region-specific research and collaborations. The session concluded with a Vote of Thanks by Dr Sanjay Verma, Principal, Guru Nanak College, Dhanbad.

The first panel discussion, on Gender and Indigeneity, was chaired by Dr Joseph Bara, independent researcher and scholar of Adivasi Studies. The panel focused on the lived experiences of Adivasi women and examined questions of identity, customary practices, labour, displacement, and resistance in Adivasi societies. The panelists included Dr Kusum Madhuri Toppo, Assistant Professor, Government College, Kansabel, Chhattisgarh; Ms Nirali Bakhla, independent researcher, Ranchi; Dr Anju Oseema Maria Toppo, Assistant Professor, Department of History, St Xavier's College, Ranchi; and Ms Deepti Mary Minz, Research Associate, Justice in Mining Network, Bagaicha Social Centre, Ranchi. The discussion foregrounded indigenous

women's perspectives on development, extractive economies, and the erosion as well as negotiation of traditional socio-cultural structures.

The second day began with a panel discussion on Gender and Education, chaired by Ms Navsharan Singh, Member, IAWS Executive Committee. The panel opened with remarks by Prof. Jean Drèze, Visiting Professor, University Department of Economics, Ranchi University, who reflected on structural inequalities in access to education and their intersections with gender, caste, class, and region. Other panelists included Ms Rashmi Jha, Piramal Foundation; Dr Sangita Chandu Thosar, Joint Secretary, IAWS; and Dr Meenakshi Munda, Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Kolhan University. The discussion addressed policy frameworks, grassroots interventions, and institutional challenges in advancing gender-equitable education in marginalised regions. During the second panel discussion, the edited volume *Teaching/Writing Resistance: Women's Studies in Contemporary Times*, edited by Panchali Ray and Shadab Bano and published by Orient Blackswan in 2024, was formally released. This book brings together several pieces that offer a reflective and critical engagement with the shifting terrains of Women's Studies within academia today. The session also included a discussion over the book with Ms Mamta Kumari, Coordinator, Women's Studies Centre, Ranchi University, acting as the discussant. She highlighted its contribution to contemporary debates within Women's Studies and feminist pedagogy.

Across the two days, the conference hosted 12 technical sessions organised around six sub-themes: Development and Displacement; Livelihood and Migration; Resistance and Social Movements; Environment, Forests, and Water Resources; Violence, Discrimination, and Marginalisation; and Health and Education Systems and Inequalities. Out of 90 abstracts received, 56 were shortlisted, and 48 scholars presented papers across the sessions. The conference witnessed wide participation from scholars, panelists, and session chairs from Jharkhand, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh. Overall, the inaugural Mid-Eastern Conference marked an important step towards building a sustained academic platform for gender-focused research in the region. The initiative reaffirmed IAWS's commitment to strengthening Women's Studies and feminist scholarship in Jharkhand, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh. The Valedictory Session brought the conference to a close and featured addresses by Dr Kalpana Karunakaran, President, IAWS; Dr Maya John, General Secretary, IAWS; Prof. Bimal Prasad Singh, Vice-Chancellor, Sido Kanhu Murmu University, Dumka; and Ms Vibha Pandey, Deputy Director, Higher Education Department. The speakers reflected on the significance of the Mid-Eastern Regional Conference and reiterated the need for sustained academic and policy engagement with gender issues in the region. The session concluded with a Vote of Thanks by Dr Shama Sonali, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, DSPMU, Ranchi.

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## **Report of a Seminar on Women, Work, and Violence organized at the IDSK**

The Women, Work, and Violence seminar took place at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK) on 12th March 2025 from 11 am to 5 pm. The event gathered scholars and professionals to discuss the intersections of gender, labour, and violence in contemporary society. The seminar aimed at the various dimensions that contribute to gender-based violence in workplaces and beyond. The seminar commenced with a welcoming address by Ishita Mukhopadhyay, followed by an introduction to the seminar by Nandini Ghosh. The first half of the session was chaired by Aparna Bandopadhyay, who provided direction to the discussions and established the foundation for meaningful deliberations. The seminar featured distinguished speakers from diverse backgrounds, each providing a unique perspective on the theme.

Swarnamaye Tripathi's paper titled *Unorganized Women Workers, Workplace Violence and the State: Examining Women's Dignity in the Brick Kiln Industry*, spoke about the absence of Internal Complaints Committees (ICC) and Local Complaints Committees (LCC) in unorganized work sectors, particularly in industries like brick kilns, where workers especially women remain vulnerable to harassment without proper grievance redressal mechanisms. This gap underscores the urgent need to effectively implement the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act, ensuring safer work environments through awareness, training, and strict enforcement. Additionally, there was glaring wage disparities within the brick kiln industry, where gender-based wage discrimination is prevalent, with women

often earning significantly less than their male counterparts for the same labour. Trayee Sinha in her paper *'Accelerating Initiatives: Resistance Against Violence on Women'* discussed the problems faced by marginalised women in the various sectors of the labour market, highlighted the struggle of paid domestic workers, followed by the gender bias prevalent in the unregulated fisheries sector, where women are often subjected to verbal abuse. Eighty-eight percent of women working in the BPO, KPO and IT sectors experience various forms of violence, which often goes unreported for fear of losing their job. To address these issues, there was need for preventive measures, including improving the socialization process, ensuring that both men and women understand their boundaries, evaluating the proper implementation of existing policies, and strengthening the role of the state in safeguarding women's rights in the workplace.

Tanushree Paul of Visva Bharati University in her paper, *'Intimate Partner Violence (IPV): Women and Paid Work'* showed that despite rising educational attainment among women, their engagement in the workforce has not increased proportionally, with a significant rise observed only in the self-employment sector. Her findings revealed that 40% of currently working women experienced domestic violence, with a higher prevalence among OBC women. She mentioned that IPV is more common among rural women (77%) than urban working women (72%). Women who work throughout the year face greater violence, and surprisingly, the wealthiest women working year-round report the

highest levels of IPV. While higher education can offer some resistance against domestic violence, it does not guarantee protection. Additionally, she points out that marital control and tolerance of IPV may contribute to the lower workforce participation of women, highlighting the deep-seated structural barriers that restrict their economic independence. Bhagyashree Rath in 'The Intersection of Technology and Gender-based Violence Addressing the Digital Abuse of Women' raised concerns about the impact of technology on gender-based violence and highlighted that 73% of women journalists face digital violence, while 85% of women suffer from forms of online abuse such as revenge pornography, image-based exploitation, and hacking (2016 data). Additionally, abusive partners increasingly use tracking software, including catfishing, sextortion, and GPS location apps, leading to severe psychological consequences such as trauma, anxiety, and depression among victims. India lacks a structured gender-based resistance framework to combat such issues. Furthermore, the UN's 2024 findings highlight the rapid rise of Artificial Intelligence(AI) and the perpetuation of a misogynistic digital environment, exacerbating the risks faced by women online.

Kaberi Chakrabarti from University of Calcutta in her paper 'The New Normal of Women's Work: A Critical Coalescence of Home And Habitation' elucidated the insecurity and unsafe conditions prevalent in informal sectors, emphasizing the transition from "work at home" to "work from home." The post-pandemic period had introduced certain barriers for women in remote work, but it has also led to progressive changes in employment opportunities. White-collar jobs such as content writing, web designing, and online tutoring have increased, yet many women remain concerned

about the stability and growth of their careers. She also indicated that social distancing has been a health measure and reflects deeper administrative and cultural politics, shaping women's experiences in the evolving labour market. Kirtimayee Routray in her paper 'A Study on Sensitization of Gender Violence in Secondary School Curriculum in Odisha: from Text to Context,' a study in three government residential schools with 30 respondents emphasized key concerns regarding self-defence mechanisms and the response to sexual abuse. While both the Central and Odisha governments have introduced self-defence programs, there remains a critical gap in immediate action, as no dedicated helpline number is available for reporting abuse. The study respondents exhibited strong image-based memory, indicating that sensitization through pictorial depictions is more effective. Although social science and literature books mention concepts like "good touch" and "bad touch," the overall curriculum does not integrate these topics comprehensively, limiting their impact on children's awareness and safety. There was emphasis on sensitization and awareness, believing that these aspects are crucial for ensuring students' understanding and empowering them to protect themselves. The discussant Arjita Dutta underlined the pressing issues faced by women in various sectors, ranging from workplace discrimination and gender-based violence to the challenges posed by technology and intimate partner violence and stressed the various shortcomings in policy implementation, the need for stronger legal frameworks and the importance of sensitization through educational and awareness-raising programmes and focused on the urgency of action and the need for continued dialogue and intervention to create a more inclusive and just society.

Later in the panel discussion on “Violent Work and Building Resilience,” moderated by Kaberi Chakrabarti, Supurna Banerjee, Poushali Basak, Samata Biswas, Geetisha Dasgupta and Damini Benny Basu shared their insights on the various forms of violence experienced in workplaces, particularly informal and unregulated sectors that showed structural inequalities perpetuating workplace violence, the psychological and economic impact on victims, and the barriers to reporting such incidents. For instance, toilets should be serve safe spaces but remain inadequately developed to meet the standards of women’s safety. The lack of gender-neutral toilets increased the challenges surrounding the accessibility and implementation of laws aimed at protecting LGBTQ individuals from harassment and violence. Harassment faced by women in lingering jobs and the difficulties female workers in urban companies encountered in securing a place to store their belongings while using toilets was stressed. Sexual violence within the film industry, underscored the challenges of addressing and educating individuals about harassment in the film fraternity. The contributions of Bina Agarwal, exploring her perspectives on gender and labour, how patriarchal norms and economic policies often marginalize women in both formal and informal labour sectors. Swati Ghosh and Kalpana Karunakaran, as discussants provided critical insights into the broader socio-political structures that perpetuate workplace violence and gender-based discrimination. They stressed the need for institutional reforms, policy

interventions, and collective resistance to create safer and more inclusive work environments. The seminar emphasized the urgency of addressing these systemic inequalities through sustained dialogue, legal accountability, and grassroots activism.

Brief Report of the seminar organized by the Eastern Regional Committee of the IAWS in collaboration with the IDSK on 23 May 2025 titled Revolutionary Women’s Praxis to Bury Colonialism, 1945-1950, by Prof. Elisabeth Armstrong, Professor of Women, Gender and Sexuality, Smith College USA.

Prof. Elisabeth Armstrong spoke of how the United Nations Convention on Child Rights (UNCRC 1993) enjoins the state to ensure the growth and well-being of all children, including those with disabilities, and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2000 envisaged Child Care Institutions as contributing to the holistic development of all children under the direct protection of the state. She shared reflections and analysis of data collected from 19 Child Care Institutions (CCIs) in West Bengal, run by both state and non-state actors, to problematize the ways in which the CCIs facilitate the development of disabled children entrusted to their care and discussed the ways in which state attitudes towards care and protection of children with disabilities reflect the larger social discourses, influence the development of children and adults with disabilities.

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## **Indian Association for Women Studies (IAWS) Northern Regional Committee organized three-part webinar series: Custody, Captivity and Carcerality – in October, November & December 2025**

The series was aimed to critically interrogate the feminist perspectives on rights and justice for women under diverse forms of custody. The objective was to develop feminist perspectives on the experience of a wide range of powered relations women are subjected to in custody which is not limited to imprisonment but extends to varied sites where constitutional rights and freedoms are erased and which form part of the patriarchal disciplining of women. The Indian state's relationship to women has long been marked by a deep contradiction. On the surface, its legislative record presents an image of commitment to gender justice—laws against child marriage, dowry, domestic violence, and equal remuneration for equal work among others. Much of the postcolonial women's movement worked within this frame, addressing the state as a potential instrument of reform. Yet this engagement largely elided the character of the state itself: a formation steeped in patriarchal logics, invested in preserving social hierarchies and gendered market operation even as it legislates against their most visible excesses. This dissonance is starkly revealed in the practices of state custody. Institutions such as prisons, detention centres, juvenile homes, and so-called protection homes are central sites through which the state governs women lives. They are often discussed in the language of welfare and protection, but their primary function is regulatory. Women confined in these spaces are subject to an apparatus of surveillance and discipline designed to produce social conformity. The pretext varies: crime, moral

danger, familial dispute, sexual transgression. The underlying impulse remains the same—an assertion of the state's right to control those women whose presence or conduct disturbs normative orders. The operation and experience of custody is profoundly shaped by caste, class, religion, and community. Marginalised women—Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and working-class—are far more likely to be subjected to the carceral state, and far more vulnerable to its cruelties. This pattern is neither accidental nor merely reflective of broader inequalities. It reveals the state's selective hostility toward those whose social existence challenges dominant hierarchies.

Custody is also not confined to 'correctional intuitions'; it expands to entire communities - captive population and people under siege who are perceived to be at war with the state or because of their identity. Muslim, Adivasi, and Kashmiri women as part of targeted populations who live under siege with fundamental rights and freedoms erased, experience a gamut of powered relations. There is a complex play of these women's experiences as participants in resistance movements, as incarcerated insurgents and, their quotidian experience of surveillance in highly securitised zones and as part of captive communities where personal-political dialectic is often the unsettling issue.

There is also a need to broaden feminist understanding of struggles in custody as well as resistance created through 'captive collectives'. From prison poetry to prison testimonies,

petitions, and strikes women prisoners have drawn attention to missing rights and constitutional transgressions in prisons. Their collective and lone struggles give us the reason to think about the justification for prisons for women and for all custodial minorities. The series aimed to debate, broaden, and deepen understanding on diverse forms of custody and resistance from a feminist perspective. The first session was titled *Understanding Custody, Captivity and Carcerality*. It was held on 25 October 2025. The session was chaired by Prof Pratiksha Baxi with Advocate Shahrukh Alam as the keynote speaker. The session was moderated by Natasha Narwal. The second session, *Prison Writings: Writing Prisons*, held on 29 November 2025, featured Advocate Sudha Bhardwaj and Seema Azad as main speakers with Prof Uma Chakravarti as the session Chair. The third session *Prison Writings: Resisting Captivity* was held on 14 December 2025 with Dr. Sharmila Purkayastha as the main speaker and Navsharan Singh as the chair.

The series covered a wide range of issues and provided a critical historical and feminist analysis of the Indian penal system. It highlighted how past feminist movements pioneered the recognition of custodial rape and called for humane treatment and special considerations for women prisoners. Delineating historical advances in custodial rape law, she reminded the participants how feminists in the 1980s innovated the legal category of custodial rape through campaigns against notorious cases. The result was not only legal recognition of rape in custody as aggravated but also, later, torture in custody. 1987 National Expert Committee on Women Prisoners had reported on the deplorable conditions for women in prison and recommended significant reforms, such as making arrest and remand

extreme exceptions for women. Despite strong findings and recommendations, the reforms proposed by the committee did not meaningfully shape legal or constitutional changes, particularly regarding bail under exceptional laws like UAPA, where women find it especially hard to obtain bail. The question of abolition—the dismantling of the penal system that disproportionately targets the marginalised—was discussed as a key feminist issue connecting systemic incarceration and prison writings by women to entrenched patriarchy, calling for more abolitionist thinking in feminist circles. How the Indian state has weaponized sexual violence to argue for the death penalty, contrary to established feminist positions that oppose capital punishment, was brought on the table with arguments that such policies only entrench state and sexual impunity.

The increasing authoritarian governing environment, and the shift from formerly inclusive and welfare-oriented state to a bureaucratic structure, where the burden of proof is shifted onto individuals, impacting especially those with less access to recognized documents—particularly women and marginalised groups. The new requirements for recognition by the state systematically exclude women and the marginalized (e.g., women in Bihar via SIR exercises), as such documents often originate from positions of power not available to all. The discussions highlighted custody and captivity as legal and existential realities. The metaphor of “custody” extended beyond prisons to describe the broader phenomenon of state control and the need for continuous validation. Similarly, while the legal ideal is formal equality, in practice the accused—particularly those from marginal or dissenting groups—face significant systemic disadvantage.

Courts tend to favour the state's perspective, endorse prosecution delays, and thus tip the scales against defendants. The discussions traced the historical shifts in the logic of incarceration from Judicial to Executive Power. Drawing on the British colonial law, the discussion traced how legal authority over rebellion moved from Indo-Islamic courts (where justness of dissent was judged) to colonial executive officers (collectors), who prioritised public order and administrative convenience over substantive justice. The colonial shift set the precedent for criminalising dissent and allowing state discretion to outweigh the rights of the accused. The historical and structural arrangements which lead to mass incarceration, long pre-trial custody, and persistent legal disadvantage for already marginalised communities, echoed through to the present legal and policing structures and the colonial carceral logics continue to shape contemporary Indian law.

The discussions drew connections between the exceptions historically created for regions such as the Northeast, early colonial punitive practices, and the present-day legal regime in which suspicion, precarity, and majoritarian politics increasingly determine who is treated as a citizen and who is treated as a subject of surveillance. The practices once carried out in the "shadow" of law—fabrication of cases, indiscriminate arrests, criminalisation of dissent—were now being openly folded into legal reasoning itself, with courts accepting political claims as legal justification. Another line of discussion focused on the limits of the liberal state's paternalistic exceptions for women, children and the elderly. While earlier regimes sometimes avoided incarcerating women, these gestures never confronted the

violence of mass incarceration as an institution. It was argued that feminist constitutionalism and intersectional jurisprudence could help revive more radical questions—such as ending routine remand, halting mass undertrial detention and questioning whether certain groups should be imprisoned at all—while still foregrounding the distinct vulnerabilities women face in custody. There was also reflection on differences between past and present judicial functioning. Some noted that colonial courts, despite their politics, often operated with greater administrative efficiency, whereas today's overloaded trial courts are risk-averse and heavily influenced by a climate of national-security rhetoric. This has contributed to prolonged incarceration and shrinking space for judicial scrutiny.

The conversations were framed within the wider structural terrain in which carcerality operates. The logics discussed in the presentations — surveillance, control, verification, and the shrinking of civil liberties—are no longer confined to criminal law but are increasingly embedded in labour regimes, digital governance, welfare systems and everyday economic life. Drawing attention to global shifts in capitalism, the rise of surveillance technologies and the erosion of labour protections, it was argued that these developments intensified women's precarity and extended carceral forms of regulation into homes, workplaces and urban space. The deliberations urged collective reflection on how to resist ongoing regressive changes in penal policy—many of which, while framed as reforms, reinforce state impunity, especially in cases of sexual violence. Despite these early advances, such recommendations largely failed to influence actual law or constitutional reform—particularly regarding bail under exceptional

laws. The recent legal reforms, such as those introduced in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, contributed to reinforcing state power, reducing civil liberties, and exceptionalising crimes against women without fostering deterrence. Key recommendations, such as adding “command responsibility” provisions (to hold officials accountable for preventing sexual violence), were ignored by the drafters of recent laws, despite their urgency in light of atrocities like Manipur and Hathras. The series emphasised that criminal law and state violence are linked with larger social hierarchies of caste, class, and gender, especially in cases where protests or resistance by women

(such as Muslim women in CAA/NRC protests or those fighting against caste violence) are met by harsh state action and criminalisation. The enriching intervention linked gendered violence and state power, noted the rise of new forms of custodial torture and communal policing practices, and emphasised the need to integrate feminist constitutional advances into present legal debates. The intervention offered a cogent feminist critique of evolving penal policies, insisting that both new and historical legal frameworks fall short of addressing gendered violence, reinforcing rather than challenging the carceral state and its majoritarian biases.

### **Report of the Eastern Regional Conference 2025 organized by the IAWS in collaboration with the Berhampur University at Berhampur University, Bhanja Vihar, Berhampur**

The Eastern Regional Conference 2025 by IAWS was convened by Dr. Bandita Panda and organized by the Women’s Studies Research Centre and the PG Departments of Sociology, Political Science, and Public Administration. It was held over two days, from October 31st to November 1st, 2025, at Berhampur University. Dr. Bagmi Priyadarshani hosted and set the tone of the inaugural session with the guest introduction delivered by Dr. Deeptimayee Mishra. The inaugural address was delivered by keynote speaker Prof. Malini Bhattacharya who offered a profound reflection on women’s struggles, emphasising that the political is deeply personal too. She questioned the nature of women’s representation in contemporary politics, especially in the context of electoral bonds and the commodification of women as a vote bank rather than as genuine political representatives. The inaugural session of the conference on

“Gender and Politics: Women’s Lives in Eastern India” set a tone of intellectual engagement, with Dr. Ishita Mukhopadhyay, emphasizing that while affirmative actions are essential, addressing structural marginalization remains a critical challenge. Dr. Maya John, Secretary of IAWS, traced the historical trajectory of the women’s movement and IAWS and advocated for a restructured democratic framework to ensure greater gender inclusivity. Prof. Gitanjali Dash, Vice Chancellor of Berhampur University, highlighted the empowerment paradox, urging participants to critically examine the gap between policy and lived realities.

In the first plenary session, chaired by Prof. Asha Hans, Dr. Aparna Bandopadhyay analyzed the limitations of the RG Kar incident as a sustained movement, noting its urban elite character. Next, Dr. Kaberi Chakrabarti discussed the

qualitative underrepresentation of women in West Bengal's political landscape, revealing the persistent influence of patriarchal norms. Tapasi Prahraj from AIDWA underscored the unfulfilled promises of the Constitution and called for a united front of diverse progressive, secular forces to challenge orthodox social and political structures. The first session chaired by Prof. Swarnamayee Tripathy and Shri Sanjay Meher, included an ecofeminist perspective of Dr. Mallik's work, which insisted on enhancing women's capabilities through participatory forest management. Both Rajesh and Priscilla examined the representation of women in state assemblies in Eastern Indian states, with the latter using a comparative perspective.

Dr. Kaberi Chakrabarti chaired the next session, where Anushka reflected on a comparative study of Odisha and West Bengal, and Dr. Rath's examined the dynamics of Odisha's state assembly, insisting on the need for more substantive and gender-inclusive restructuring of electoral politics, with particular concern for the underrepresentation of disabled women. Session 2 chaired by Dr. Nandini Ghosh, highlighted the role of the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti in fostering women's cultural agency and the journey of women from minority and refugee status to citizenship. Dr. Shilpa discussed fisherwomen's movements in the Sundarbans showcasing innovative community engagement and entitlement systems. Session 3 chaired by Dr. Aparna Bandopadhyay, addressed the politics of migration and the situation of Adivasi women. Manisha discussed the gendered impact of mining on vulnerable communities like the Kondh and Jhuria, while Sonali highlighted the marginalized space of Dongria Kondh women in the Niyamgiri protests. Session 4 chaired by Dr. Deeptimayee Mishra, examined phallogocentric

biases in the judiciary and domestic violence, with Dr. Routaray stressing the importance of education and legal awareness in combating child marriage. Barun emphasized the need for inclusive change to address caste-based inequalities. Session 5 chaired by Dr. Sarada Prasanna Rout, focused on repression, representation, and rights. Dr. Dutta called for greater inclusion of women in sports, while Itishree highlighted the gendered impact of climate change. Swati and Bidisha critiqued customary personal laws that deny women property, marriage, and political rights. The final session, chaired by Dr. Ishita Mukhopadhyay, discussed the unrecognized labour of Dera community women weavers, emphasizing the constraints of patriarchy and structural barriers. Dr. Kakali traced the history of women's labour protests in Bengal, underscoring the need for economic and social inclusion.

The second plenary session explored the critical theme of inclusivity within women's struggles. Chairperson Pramila Swain, Secretary of NAWO, underscored the pioneering role of women leaders in securing constitutional rights and highlighted their participation in regional and national movements, while critically reflecting on the limited substantive impact of state policies on women's political participation. Speaker Dr. Nandini Ghosh, examined the marginalization of issues concerning disabled women within mainstream women's movements. Reshma Murmu, from a CSO in Jharkhand, brought attention to the often-overlooked narratives of tribal women's courage and leadership in both tribal and national freedom movements. Aishwarya Rituparna, District Audit Officer and the first transgender civil servant of Odisha, shared her lived experiences, identity crisis, and gender discrimination she encountered and how she successfully dealt with them. The

conference's valedictory address was delivered by Prof. Swarnamayee Tripathy, who advocated for a shift in the language of governance from exclusion to one rooted in empathy and justice, emphasizing the reimagining politics to deepen democracy and strengthen gender justice. The VC Prof. Gitanjali Dash gave a call to build alliances that would cross all intersectional barriers. Dr. Kalpana Karunakaran, President of IAWS,

addressed the conference online, and the final report was presented by Dr. Bhagyashree Rath. Faculty members Dr. Sarada Prasanna Rout, Dr. Soumendra Kumar Mohanty, and Jainadatta Pattnayak extended their efforts along with student volunteers and Ph.D. scholars. The vote of thanks was delivered by Dr. Sanjay Meher.

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### **Report of the Writing Workshop, organised by the Southern Regional Committee of the IAWS and the Centre for Women's Studies, Pondicherry University, 10-11 November 2025**

The Southern Regional Committee of the Indian Association of Women's Studies, comprising of the following members: A Suneetha, Suneetha Rani, Aruvi B, Sowjanya Tamalapakula, Du Saraswathi, Sudeshna Mukherjee, Sunandamma R., Nitya Vasudevan, Rekha Raj, Shamshad Hussain K.T., Shabna P., Layana Anand, Deepa Ebenezer, Kalpana Karunakaran, Archanaa Seker, Aruvi Ravana, Mini Sukumar and Meena Gopal, decided after much discussion to organise a writing workshop for young people. The idea was also to have contributions in diverse languages, but the first such workshop was focused on English. A call for applications was circulated with the title Learning History, Writing Futures: A Workshop of Reflection and Writing. The idea was to offer young students, scholars and activists a workshop that focused on what feminism and the women's movement meant, as most of ideas on the women's movement remain removed from contemporary discussions. While most young people believed in feminism and realised the importance of intersectionality, these were mostly learnt through textbook based discussions. The

emergence from and the relationship of these ideas and concepts to feminist movements and assertions were unfamiliar to contemporary activists and scholars. Therefore, the workshop was proposed as a reflection on feminist ideas and writing. The idea was to know these histories that can be a foundation for "writing women's lives." The format of the workshop was to comprise of short lectures, presentations and discussions, followed by group work coordinated by the members of the Southern Regional Committee.

Student volunteers from the MA and PhD programmes in Women's Studies at the Centre for Women's Studies in Pondicherry supported the organising and preparations for the workshop. A total of 213 participants sent in their applications from which 30 participants were selected and invited to the workshop. This included a majority of PhD scholars, but also a few who were MA and even BA students with a disciplinary diversity as well. They came from Hyderabad in Telangana, Kottayam, Calicut and Trivandrum in Kerala, Chennai in Tamil Nadu, as also Bangalore and

Delhi. A quarter of the participants were from Pondicherry as well. The student volunteers kept up communication with the participants and resource persons, prepared the conference material, organised the accommodation and food arrangements as required for the workshop. A set of readings were circulated in advance that included, 'We were making history: Life stories of women in the 'Telangana People's Struggle by Stree Shakti Sanghatana; 'Law of one's own' On Dalit women's arduous struggle for social justice by Smita Patil; 'Sleepless fathers in Malayalam cinema: Unravelling the dynamics of caste and masculinity by Navaneetha Mokkil; 'The mystery of Thornfield: Representations of Madness in 'Jane Eyre' by Valerie Beattie, 'Santimmi's Ramayana by Du Saraswathi, 'Can the Monster Speak by Paul Preciado; 'Foreword by Pankajam and Kalpana in 'A Woman of No Consequence by Kalpana Karunakaran; and 'A Quiet Pedagogy by V Geetha. The readings were followed by a set of questions that were to be engaged with during the workshop.

On 10th November, the workshop was inaugurated by the Vice-Chancellor of Pondicherry University, Prof. P. Prakash Babu, who delivered the Presidential Address. The Vice-Chancellor traced the history of women's movement and women's studies in the country and referred to the momentous 'Towards Equality' report and the contribution of feminists. Dr. Kalpana Karunakaran, President, Indian Association of Women's Studies delivered the inaugural address. Following the inaugural address the first session was chaired by V. Geetha who introduced the speakers as feminists who belonged to the generation of the late 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, each of whom addressed issues of gender and caste, while responding to their own immediate socio-cultural realities but in such engagement

brought out the similarities in the historical trajectory but also the differences specific to their particular contexts. The first speaker, A Suneetha, focused on the narrative of Chityala Ailamma in the book, 'We were making history.' The text broke with existing historiography, and critiqued it as it reflected gender hierarchies in societies. She focused on how the text was received by different social actors, and what the legacy of Ailamma was, and whether it was a dead question. The Stree Shakti Sanghatana there produced it were influenced by the decolonial movements and critiqued the Left, speaking for a different feminist movement. In its emergence, the text was seditious and activists read it secretly, but it influenced different movements and is today present in academic syllabi. She located the contemporary feminist relevance of the text by speaking of Ailamma as a Bahujan tenant farmer in the 1950s, whose life resonates with the widows of the farmers's suicides of 'Telangana today. Kalpana Karunakaran spoke of intergenerational family history through a feminist lens via her book, 'A Woman of No Consequence' by presenting the extraordinary life of her grandmother, using family archives, while situating her within the social universe of her time. She does this with the conviction that the personal is always political. She started by citing her own mother's writing of her grandmother's unconventional and reclusive life. Using fragile sources, such as a diary, letters, auto-fiction, and other writings, including a foreword by her grandmother, she constructs her life through juxtaposing several other sources.

Du Saraswathi, a theatre person and poet whose productions are political. She read out two poems, translated into English that dealt of metaphors of music and song emerging with embodied self. The poems connected nature, turmoil and the

power of resurgence of the spirit and the body. The poems reflected on the politics of identity, answering questions of who she was? She then performed sections of Santimmi Ramayana in Kannada, whose translated transcripts were circulated prior. They focused on a retelling from the perspective of Sita, who challenges both Ravana and Rama in their engagements with her. Sowjanya Tamalapakula, in introducing the mainstream media's construction of the deviant, murderous, mad woman, brought up the question of female subjectivity. As feminists how do we construct this female subjectivity when the mainstream always portray what is expected of women, as in the Sita of television Ramayanas. Turning to the reading of Jane Eyre's Bertha Mason as the mad woman in the attic, she dwelled on how anyone who resists is labelled mad, loathsome, fearful. She stressed how writings by Volga, Ranganayakamma, Jane Eyre, Woolf and others who spoke of such subjectivities as formative for her thinking and writing. Aruvi B., introduced her piece by Paul Preciado, 'Can the Monster Speak?' as belonging to the tradition of speeches that were not allowed to be made, such as of Dr. Ambedkar's to the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal which he wrote as the Annihilation of Caste. She raised the question, whether her speech was palatable even to those in this room, and whether she can talk back, and on the relevance of feminist anger. Referring to the antipathy of writers such as JK Rowling who channel their energies and resources to anti-transgender politics, she asked. Paul Preciado challenges the psychoanalysts who have constructed them as a monster? But how do we create our own subjectivities given such a visibility, and yet be feminists? Rekha Raj, began by locating herself as a Dalit feminist writer who had to also struggle despite her own political upbringing. Yet she felt the need to write, not so

much for herself as for the community, for the politics of locating caste and gender. Referring to the first reading, she focused how caste determines the moral worth of a Dalit woman's violation of her body, and this should hold a mirror to Indian feminism. The second essay looks at the manner of portraying subaltern masculinity. But both essays look at the construction of Dalit masculinity and femininity, and the structural positions that dictate this. V. Geetha in her presentation spoke of what prompted her writing over the years, referring to the outrage following the English translation of Perumal Murugan's book on a practice of sexual transgression, and the murder of a Brahmin girl and the killing of a backward class girl, and how caste and gender renders some bodies visible and yet others invisible, and follows other registers of silencing and speech. In her own writing, she has tried to raise questions and opening up the space for feminist thinking and engagement, while also not rushing to label but focus on the particularity of experience. In drawing the discussions of the day, V. Geetha, spoke of the presentations as reflecting both history and the locations/regions, and asking what would then an Indian feminism be? Further different modes such as song, theatre, music, dance become forms of articulation, and concluding with the constant question of who is the subject of feminism? In the concluding session of the day, the participants broke into 4 groups with 2 resource persons, and engaged in discussions based on the presentations. They later decided to work on a piece of writing that they wished to focus on.

On day 2, the session began with a short discussion by A. Suneetha and V. Geetha on how to write about complicated political realities around us at the current moment, especially when gender is not addressed in these discussions. This pertained

largely to the question of Muslim identities. There was discussion on the experience of women's groups who were part of rehabilitation efforts following the Gujarat carnage of 2002. The complex question of discussing gender within Muslim community contexts was laid out for attention, particularly at this juncture. This was followed up by continuing the discussion in groups. In the post-lunch session, there were presentations on the experience of writing by Selvam and a hands-on exercise on tools for writing by Aruvi. Selvam spoke of her journey through feminism having been introduced to Suttum Vidhi Sudar, a feminist magazine in Tamil, to meeting women at the National Conference in Calicut to starting her own efforts at writing for children. It was feminist questions that remained a thread throughout her journey. Aruvi demonstrated the use of a software tool called Papeeria, an online text editor that has helped her create and maintain documents that are professionally typeset and

formatted. She will also be touched upon BibTeX, a citation management tool and automated version control that has been universally beloved by academics for decades due to its rigour and portability. This was followed by group work, where participants gave feedback requesting more qualitative interaction among participants themselves, short writing assignments with focused prompts, and some common activities. In order to respond to these request, an online writing workshop was conducted from 2 March to 13 April 2026, in which nearly 14 participants joining for the 6 weeks, and were able to plan, execute and generate writings such as a concept note, draft proposal, an essay for a publication, a thesis chapter and so on.

The video documentation of the presentations at the workshop prepared the EMRC, Pondicherry University, and supported by the IAWS is available at [iaws.co.in](http://iaws.co.in)

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## Statements on Transgender Persons Amendment Bill

On 13th March 2026, the government through its Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment, introduced the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill in the Lok Sabha. It was added suddenly to the agenda of the House through a supplementary list of business without affording Members of Parliament sufficient opportunity to read the Bill before its introduction. Subsequently, the Bill became an Act.

The Bill fundamentally stripped people of their right to determine their own gender identity, affirmed in the NALSA judgement of 2014, and ends up creating a narrow and arbitrary category of transgender persons eligible for legal protection. Now, mandatory medical certification, physical examinations, by a medical board, will violate privacy and restrict access to health services. Further there is new criminal provision introduced increases the risks to criminalisation of communities of transgender persons supportive organisations and service providers, thereby undoing a decade of legal process and community struggle.

The IAWS issued a statement which is reproduced below, even as several feminists, queer-trans activists and civil society actors issued statements, the links for which are given here:

- Collective Statement on Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill 2026 at this link: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdKNOw0cQrMbkYm2srKIBa-RHBMHRVCz6jkY9W-l714oJy8MQ/viewform>
- Collective Statement from Transgender/Queer Persons with Disabilities on Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill no. 79, 2026: <https://orinam.net/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Transgender-Queer-Persons-with-Disabilities-statement-Transbill2026.pdf>
- Collective Statement by Lawyers, Feminists, and concerned citizens to the President on the Trans Bill for reconsideration by Parliament : <https://sabrangindia.in/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Letter-to-President-on-Transgender-Amendment-Bill.pdf>
- Clause-by-Clause Analysis of proposed amendments to The Transgender Persons Act 2019 : [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zmeEGi4phWjWL8RW76vEAw9CHSpnOIRD/view?fbclid=PAZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQPNTY3MDY3MzQzMzUyNDI3AAGnmH3We7Ih1Dii3OAlor-sSj2H3p9cj9XvCJ5nnL7WnEN5NFdIgDEoVn0YBI\\_aem\\_f\\_nLgVwCf9\\_X6sWQk-K6hg](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zmeEGi4phWjWL8RW76vEAw9CHSpnOIRD/view?fbclid=PAZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQPNTY3MDY3MzQzMzUyNDI3AAGnmH3We7Ih1Dii3OAlor-sSj2H3p9cj9XvCJ5nnL7WnEN5NFdIgDEoVn0YBI_aem_f_nLgVwCf9_X6sWQk-K6hg)

## STATEMENT

**Date: 06.04.2026**



We, the Indian Association for Women's Studies, strongly condemn and oppose the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026 that has been passed in both houses of Parliament withdrawing the rights granted after a long struggle to one of the most vulnerable communities, marginalised on account of gender normativity.

In 2014, the NALSA judgement of the Supreme Court had granted the right of self-determination of gender identity not just for members of the transgender community, but for anyone who was discriminated on account of their gender identity. This gave protection and hope to those such as non-binary persons, gender queer and intersex individuals, who until then were not just invisible but subject to discrimination.

This judgement spoke of the revolutionary manner in which the highest court of the country listened to the voice of the most marginal and acknowledged their struggle to be recognised as citizens. Apart from this the court also took another step to expand gender by recognising the category of the third gender. All these steps signified both an inclusion and broadening of the space of gender identity. The courts essentially responded to the larger discourse in the country around questions of gender and sexuality that stemmed from long years of struggle, contributions of the queer and feminist movements, as well as the legal and academic work produced by fields of gender and women's studies.

Unfortunately, the law that emerged from Parliamentary deliberations under the aegis of the government in 2019 constrained several of these gains wrested by the queer and trans communities. However, the earlier legislation still offered protection to trans men, trans women, gender queer and non-binary persons on account of the provision of self-perceived gender identity.

The current act (2026) ignores this history and removes several of these legal protections and rights. The Act ushers in several modifications and omissions, such as the removal of the right to self-determination a biologically determined definition of gender, and exclusion of intersex and transmasculine persons, non-binary and gender-diverse people who are not part of socio-cultural communities. Not only this, the government now insists on mandatory medical certification and disclosure, thereby shifting recognition of gender identity from the individual concerned to a state-appointed medical board, enforcing invasive physical examinations.

As a professional body of scholars and activists, the Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS), views this act as a setback not just for the lives of the trans gender communities but activists and allies within gender studies. We have always struggled for legal change to advance women's rights and rights of those at the margins of gender and sexuality. We thus note with anguish and horror this deliberate violation and denial of rights long fought for. We are also dismayed at the haste with which the Act has been pushed through both houses of Parliament and secured Presidential assent despite the widespread condemnation from concerned stakeholders in civil society. We affirm our solidarity with the vulnerable sections of India's citizens who stand to lose their hard-won rights and dignity with the passing of this Act.

 **Indian Association for  
Women's Studies (IAWS)**

<https://www.iaws.co.in/>