

Role of performing arts in the empowerment of third gender community people in urban Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Abstract: The study aims to understand how various sections of performing arts empowered the urban third-gender community of Bangladesh. This study is qualitative in nature, and the data are collected through an in-depth personal interview. Eight Interviewees were selected purposefully who were living in urban Dhaka and questioned by a semi-structured questionnaire. The inductive thematic analysis method has been used to analyze the interviews.

The study found that after choosing the performing arts as their profession the respondents felt empowered as they earned their livelihood on their own. Eventually, they got to be free from the surveillance of ‘Guru Ma (s)’, traditional leaders of their community. The study also found that they earn less than before. But, performing arts help them to lead a better and more respectful life.

Keywords: *Third Gender Community, Empowerment, Performing arts.*

Introduction

The so-called ‘third gender’ community is one of the most backward communities in Bangladesh. According to the Social Services Directorate, the country's total number of third-gender people is about 11 thousand. However, according to private estimation, the number is about 50 thousand. They are ensuring their livelihood and economic security by working in various underpaid jobs.

Besides, many of them are ensuring their economic security by working in various branches of performing arts such as singing, acting, and dance, etc.

In this study, I want to focus on whether third-gender people are being empowered or not by working in different branches of performing arts.

A person is empowered when he or she is able to make their own decisions in society and is accepted as a ‘regular people’. They are granted various rights and advantages, guaranteeing that people of all genders are granted the same rights.

This study will be conducted to observe how does working in performing arts help the third gender people to make them able to make their own decision in their personal and social life.

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Research Methodology

Research Design

An exploratory research design has been undertaken in this qualitative study to conceptualize how performing arts could be an empowerment tool for third-gender people. The urban metropolis of Dhaka was explored as a site where the members of the third gender enact multiple performances like singing, dancing, and acting. The qualitative approach befitted this paper in describing, in detail, the experiences of a subjugated group while giving prime importance to depth and context in their story of empowerment. In this study, there were two main data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. With these methods, rich, narrative data will be produced.

Sampling Procedure

The sampling technique that has been followed for the selection of respondents is nonprobability purposive. The sampling technique followed for selecting the respondents was a non-probability purposive one. The respondents were selected based on their active involvement in performing arts, residence in urban Dhaka, and willingness to participate. Eight third-gender individuals were included to make sure the sample represents variation in experiences within performing arts.

Data Collection Tools

Semi-structured interviews and FGDs were the main tools of data collection. In this regard, the semi-structured interview guide was developed to make sure that the objectives of the study were captured as participants provided detailed narratives. FGDs were conducted to elicit collective perspectives and shared experiences. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supported with observational notes in order to capture emotional expressions and contextual nuances.

Data Analysis Techniques: Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was used in analyzing qualitative data. Major themes that were part of the analysis included economic stability, social empowerment, and personal autonomy. The sub-themes that emerged were those to do with financial struggles, acceptance by society, and family dynamics. Coding was carried out to discover patterns and relationships in the data as a means of ensuring completeness in the understanding of respondents' experiences. The analysis was, therefore, done based on data collected from eight respondents, which provided a strong basis for shared characteristics and individual nuances.

Objectives of the study

The objective of this study is to highlight how third gender community is empowering themselves through working in performing arts. The study will also see how these people are becoming financially self-reliant and socially dignified after working in the sector as the involvement in well-paid employment increase individual dignity.

Theoretical Framework

Empowerment theory was used to explain this study. According to manifold authors (Cattaneo, L. B., & Chapman, A. R. 2010; Kabeer, N. 2005; McWhirter, E. H. 1991; Oxaal, Z., & Baden, S. 1997; Pinderhughes, E. B. 1983 Rappaport, J. 1987), empowerment is a process in which people, organizations, and socially stigmatized, excluded, and marginalized communities gain power and control to make important decisions. Moreover, a consensus among numerous authors exists that empowerment encompasses transformation and yields outcomes.

Adams (2008) emphasizes the limitations of any single definition of empowerment. Yet he attempts to provide a definition; Empowerment is the ability of people, groups, and/or communities to take charge of their situations, exercise their authority, and achieve their own goals as well as the process by which, both individually and collectively, they are able to maximize the quality of their lives and those of others.

Limitations of the Study

In such a short period of time, it is difficult to find people who work in the performing arts in the third gender community for a living. This research deserves uninterrupted time. After all, it is too tough to reach a conclusion on the basis of only eight interviews. Because, within the stipulated time it was not possible to interview the respondents due to their busy schedule and many other difficulties. In addition, many were reluctant to talk to the researcher due to their insecurities.

Literature review

Previous studies in these fields focused on the empowerment of the third gender in different areas and the rights of the community.

Reddy (2005) conducted a study on Hijras, Kothis, and the Political Aspects of Sexual Marginality in Hyderabad, India. The author examined a specific aspect of culture within the Indian 'homosexual' community to demonstrate how considering local knowledge and its socio-economic foundations can influence healthcare policies. In addition, the study suggests a small method to comprehend the significance of culture in order to finally tackle the inefficiency of prevention programs and rectify the disparities in health outcomes among different social groups and influential entities.

Khan et al. (2009) conducted a study on the social exclusion of third-gender people in Bangladesh, focusing on hijra. They found that hijra are at the extreme margin of exclusion, lacking sociopolitical space for dignity and self-esteem. They argue that their deprivation stems from non-recognition beyond the male-female dichotomy, preventing them from societal potential and security. They also highlight the need for safer sex interventions and recognition of hijra's rights, as they are citizens of Bangladesh and part of society's diversity.

Tanupriya and Pannikot (2016) explored the kinesthetics of gender identity through transgender autobiographies. Kinesthetics, the study of body language, helps people understand

the third gender better than classroom teaching. The study also sought to identify imitations in third-gender depictions in their autobiographies, focusing on the fissures in imitation. In a separate study, Surya (2022) explored the role of gender identity in empowering transgender lives, focusing on selected texts. The study highlighted the importance of transgender people's autobiographies in understanding their struggles, experiences, and political movements. It also examined the lives of transgender individuals who have access to education and social equality and the role of educational and employment programs in their community's development.

Hossain's 2017 study explores the complex relationship between hijra, third gender, and sexual rights in Bangladesh. He argues that while the international community views hijra as a progressive socio-legal advance for obtaining sexual rights, locals view them as a special group born with 'missing' or ambiguous genitals. This has led to a discourse of disability in the constitution, which has been supported by various interest groups, including civil society, the state, the international community, and hijra themselves. The recognition of hijra as citizens worthy of rights has been a significant challenge in achieving these rights.

Pinkey and Romana (2019) conducted a study on the recognition of transgender as a third gender, focusing on their education and employment rights. The study compared India and Pakistan, revealing that transgenders in Bangladesh are not receiving proper education due to gender non-acceptance and discrimination. This results in a lack of employment rights, as there is no existing law promoting the rights of transgender individuals. The study aims to uphold their right to education and employment.

Aneesh and John (2020) explored the empowerment of transgender women in Kerala, focusing on their life experiences and contributions to the community. They highlighted the process of self-empowerment among successful transgenders, who contribute positively to the community and achieve their goals. The acceptance of transgenders is increasing, with more members revealing their gender identity and living life on their own terms. The study highlights the importance of empowering transgender women in Kerala and the positive impact they have on their communities.

Sema and Islam's (2020) study examined the empowerment status of transgender people in Bangladesh, specifically in the Savar national memorial-based area in Dhaka City. The research aimed to determine the limits of changes in the dependent variable, which is the perception of respondents about their overall empowerment, based on the three independent variables: Economic Empowerment of Transgender People (EcoEm), Political/Legal Empowerment of Transgender People (PoLeEm), and Social Empowerment of Transgender People (SocEm). The study found that while transgender people are now being empowered, there is still room for improvement to sustain the country's growth and development.

Aziz and Azhar's (2020) study explores the social exclusion and legal recognition of the third gender in Bangladesh, focusing on their experiences with accessing work and health services.

Despite the government's official recognition, third-gender individuals are not legally registered at local government offices. Systemic discrimination hinders their ability to find employment or access health services. The study suggests increased vocational and training opportunities for third-gender individuals, greater sensitization for healthcare providers, and legal advocacy to protect their civil rights, including the ability to legally register and change their legal names. This research highlights the need for greater awareness and protection for third-gender individuals in Bangladesh.

Result and Discussion

Socio-Demographic characteristics

In this section the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented. In this study respondents belong to age group 18-45. Most of the respondents had completed Higher secondary level and some of them had attended higher education. It is evidenced in this study that most of the respondents have a moderate relation with their families which is a common picture in Bangladesh. Respondents used to perform more than one form of performing arts.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Respondent no.	Age	Education	Relation with family	Performing Arts
Respondent 1	43	Hsc	Moderate	Dance and acting
Respondent 2	32	Class 8	Moderate	Dance and acting
Respondent 3	28	Hsc	No	Theatre acting
Respondent 4	33	Hsc	Moderate	Dance and acting
Respondent 5	39	Hsc	Good	Singing and dance
Respondent 6	29	Ssc	Moderate	Singing and dance
Respondent 7	24	Hsc	No	Dance
Respondent 8	19	Ssc	No	Dance

Performing arts

In this study most of the respondents are involved in Dancing as their Performing arts. Only 2 of the respondents are involved in theatre performance and the rest one is engaged with singing. Some respondents perform two types of arts simultaneously. In this regard one of the respondents mentioned that,

I have been involved in theater and dance clubs from my childhood and learned from them. I used to act in theatre at Mohammadpur and learn dance at ‘Bulbul academy’. In addition, I also got training from different art instructors.

(Respondent: 2)

Most of the respondents learn these arts from different institutions and in most of the cases their families were supportive towards them and sometimes their family members inspired them to become involved in these activities. As one of the respondents stated that,

In my childhood, I used to see my sister performing dance and music on BTV regularly. My mother used to say that one of you two sisters will sing and the other will dance and we will enjoy it..... when I was in class Five, I joined Manikganj Mukul Academy and I was there for five years. So that, I used to perform with them since my childhood.

(Respondent: 1)

There was a sister in the house next door. While staying with you, I used to watch you and if I wanted, he would teach you. Basically, I am interested in seeing him. He used to take me to various events. He also acted there. I have learned to live with him.

(Respondent: 7)

As in the so called mainstream Bengali society the third genders are the victims of gender discrimination and face restrictions and obstacles due to the mainstream culture and misconceptions towards the third gender. So the respondents mentioned that in some cases they were isolated and humiliated because of their identity in the institutions they used to learn these Performing arts from their peer groups. As one of the respondents said that,

At first, everyone accepted me as usual. Later when they realize I am not normal like them they start avoiding me.

(Respondent: 4)

Performing arts have brought radical changes in the profession of the respondents of this study. Most of the respondents are currently involved in various Performing arts as their profession. And most of them perform two or three performances in a month.

I mostly perform on stage apart from working with various Youtubers, a few cinema and different dramas. Sometimes I go to dance if people call me in their program. Mostly I dance in different bars if I no longer have work of acting or film shooting.

(Respondent: 2)

Performing arts and Economic stability

In mainstream Bengali society the third genders are used to collecting money from people and this seemed as the only livelihood work for this community. However, performing arts has brought a radical change in this regard. And due to this reason, there is a change in the income pattern of the respondents. Most of the respondents earn their livelihood from their

performance and the income is not that much. They also mentioned that they earn less than before. In this case one of the respondents mentioned that,

We do not have these things fixed. I get 5000-taka, 10000 taka and many times I don't get even 1000 taka. Many times, even if money is supposed to be paid, the money is not paid after the performance. But go if you get a call, because many times new job offers are available from there. Work is necessary because commodity prices have increased. So, I work for a small amount of money to cover the expenses.

(Respondent: 1)

In terms of economic stability and improvement most of the respondents in this study are lagging behind. Most of the respondents have changed their profession and they are struggling with the new one. However, they are satisfied with their current profession and economic conditions. In this regard a respondent claimed that,

The income is a little low in this profession..... Everything is going up in price. However, I am at least a little bit at peace by eating 'dal-bhat' with my hard work money which is much better than begging for money from people.

(Respondent: 4)

On the other hand, in some cases income from the Performing arts (new profession) is not enough for the respondents to fully avoid their past profession. Sometimes they have to collect money from people for their survival. Thus, they cannot avoid the neglected life and cannot get the scope to lead a respectful life. In this regard one of the respondents mentioned that,

In fact, it is very difficult to live in one profession from our current situation. So, I perform dances in different places and also collect money sometimes.

(Respondent: 5)

As stated earlier the people of the Hijra community in Bangladesh are well known for collecting money from people and it is considered as their profession. However, the path of choosing a different profession is not so easy for them and in most cases, they have to choose begging as a profession due to some invisible force. As the story of a respondent is something like that,

Once I used to work in a private farm. But when they came to know that I am third gender, they forced me to leave the job. Since then, I have no fixed occupation. Now I do whatever I need to do for a living. Sometimes, I collect money from people. That's it.

(Respondent: 5)

In the life of every Hijra in Bangladesh a person plays the most vital role and the person in none other than the 'Guru Maa' - the community head of a Hijra community. Every Hijra's income is influenced by Guru Maa -A portion of the income is to be paid to Guru Maa.

However, after choosing the new profession (Performing arts) the respondents are claimed to be free from the surveillance of Guru Maaa and they do not have to pay her like before. In this case, one of the respondents stated that,

My Guru Maa did not put much pressure on me. Gave me the opportunity to work independently. He did not let me when I wanted to get out from Guru Ma, she did not forbid me. Now I am working alone, and also dependent on myself. I am not accountable to anyone.

(Respondent: 4)

Though one of the respondents mentioned that she was never with Guru-Maa. In this case she was never under the surveillance of anyone. As she mentioned,

I was never with any Guru-Maa.

(Respondent: 7)

So, from the above it can be understood that the Performing arts is not that much enough to bring economic stability for the people of this community. However, this can give the people of this community a better and respectful life, also a kind of freedom to lead their own life.

Performing arts and Social Empowerment

Social empowerment is an important factor for the minority group of a society. This becomes more important when it is considered for the third gender community. In our society the third gender community is socially isolated and they do not get proper respect. However, social empowerment is necessary for the people of this community to maintain a proper life. In this regard involvement with any social or cultural association is the basic one. Most of the respondents are members of one social or cultural association and one of them had her own cultural team. In this regard one of the respondents stated that,

I used to run a team by myself, when I got a job offer, I would go with my team. But now work is not available like before. So, I go myself, and if someone asks me to take them, I take them.

(Respondent: 1)

On the other hand, the respondents do not think the perception of the society regarding them does not change that much after choosing Performing arts as their profession.

Not much has changed. But I feel proud or like that I can manage my life without knocking people's doors. Sometimes it feels better when someone appreciates our work. Then it seems that we are also part of the society, maybe we can do something good if we get the chance. And it is normal not to change because there is nothing in the books about us. If people don't read anything in books about us then how will they know that we are normal people too?

(Respondent: 5)

However, one of the respondents mentioned that after choosing Performing arts as a profession she is getting more social respect as the audience are enjoying her work. She mentioned that,

We are having outstanding responses from the audience. If they didn't want us, we wouldn't get work. People don't leave me once they see my performance. Overall good response. Some people, after enjoying my performance, tell me that I really like your character as well as your performance. I feel very good when people inspire me like this way. It seems that apart from everything else, they love my work. So, I think audience take it in a very positive way.

(Respondent: 2)

So, most of the respondents mentioned that they are getting positive responses from the audience about their performance. Though in some cases they are not neglected by the ill minded people and they are used to this. However, one of the respondents claimed that,

Some people take it very positively. But some think we are involved with immoral things. I really don't care what they think. Because I can't change everyone's mind.

(Respondent: 3)

People say it well. They want entertainment, we can provide good entertainment. After seeing my performance, everyone fell silent.

(Respondent: 6)

Family Acceptance

In Bengali society, Hijras are not accepted by their families. In most cases they are separated from their families and have little contact with their families. Most of the respondents mentioned that their relationship with their families have improved after choosing Performing arts as a profession. That cannot be said that they are fully accepted by their family but there is a sign of improvement. As one of the respondents mentioned that,

In my family there is no such headache about my affairs. All in all they are happy with the way I am living now.

(Respondent: 1)

Self- Confidence

In terms of self-confidence, decision-making ability is the most important factor. In most of the cases transgender do not have the decision-making ability as they have to stay under the surveillance of a Guru Maa. Though Performing arts brings a change in this regard. As one of the respondents mentioned that,

Now I can make my own decision. I am earning my own money and paying my own expenses. So, I don't need to obey anyone else anymore. I do what I want.

(Respondent: 1)

Respondents also mentioned that they are more confident than before and their performance have a great influence in this regard. Though sometimes they feel that people are showing sympathy for them. As one of the respondents mentioned that,

Yes. I really feel confident when I get praise from people about my performance. On the other hand, moment after I lose my confidence thinking about my difficulties to successfully completing a lot of work as well as to protect my personal safety. Somehow depression exists somewhere in my mind assuming the thoughts of people about me and don't get what I want. Walking somewhere, it seems like a thousand people are showing sympathy for me.

(Respondent: 2)

Most of the respondents are satisfied with their identify of an artist. So, they feel proud of their new profession and they feel happy for themselves. Sometimes they are concern about the harassed reality of the life struggle though they are happy and satisfied of their new life and profession. As according to a respondent of this study,

I am satisfied because now I am free. I definitely am more satisfied working as an artist. The reason is that there was no respect in the work I used to do. Now I get a lot of respect which I didn't get before.

(Respondent: 2)

So, performing arts has a great influence in building up the self-confidence of the respondents. The respondents are free, have respects in the society and have the scope to do the things they like as their profession and these boost their confidence and increased their decision-making power.

Recommendation

Respondent recommendations some important things regarding their life improvement and smoothing their path towards Performing arts. In this regard one of the respondents mentioned that,

In that case, it is enough if the influential people of our society came forward. For example, if we are given sales jobs in shopping malls, then we can lead a smooth life. Again, if the government create opportunities for us to work in offices or if government-subsidized movies are giving to those of us who are involved in cultural activities on a regular basis or if directors make movies with our stories that will change the mind of people, is enough for us.

(Respondent: 2)

I advise everyone in the community like me to open up to people and engage in creative work.

(Respondent: 6)

You see, everyone thinks about the future, but what do we think about our future? Who cares about us? The government should think about our future. Are we citizens of the country? No one will talk about us except our people. So we want if one or two reserved seats from among us are given in parliament then they can work with us. Then we wouldn't have to go around the streets and take money from people to live.

(Respondent: 1)

So, performing arts have an influence on the empowerment of the third gender of our community. However, the influence is not that much enough to change the life struggle of this community. Slowly in some cases like social, individual empowerment is being improved. Though the economic empowerment is not sufficient in this regard.

Conclusion

The third gender community in Bangladesh is one of the most underdeveloped subgroups, working in underpaid jobs to secure their livelihood and economic security. Many of these individuals are employed in performing arts, such as singing, acting, and dance. The study aims to examine how the neglected third gender community in Bangladesh is becoming self-reliant and empowering themselves by meeting their economic needs through performing arts. The data was collected through in-depth interviews with five urban Dhaka residents. The study found that after choosing performing art, respondents claimed to be free from Guru Maaa's surveillance and earn a modest income from their performances. However, this can provide a better and respectful life for the community, allowing them to lead their own lives. The study emphasizes the importance of ensuring the economic and social emancipation of the third gender community and their human rights to foster overall country development.

Future Research Directions

Further studies can be undertaken to compare different cultural and geographic contexts in order to understand the broader applicability of performing arts as an empowerment tool. Longitudinal studies would help in assessing how far the impact of performing arts is long-lasting on the lives of third-gender people, especially with regard to economic stability and social acceptance. However, it may also be interesting to explore other forms of empowerment existing beyond performing arts, like vocational training or even policy interventions, to obtain a wide idea regarding improvements in the lives of dispossessed communities. These studies would help provide new and more in-depth insight into the dynamics of empowerment itself, therefore informing programs and policies as well.

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