



International Journal of Research in Academic World



Received: 14/April/2024

IJRAW: 2024; 3(5):79-83

Accepted: 18/May/2024

An Introduction to the Historical Evolution of Transgenders in India

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Abstract

The historical narrative surrounding transgender individuals is characterized by its diversity, complexity, and notable variations across different cultures and historical epochs. Although the term "transgender" is a relatively recent construct primarily influenced by Western perspectives on gender, it is essential to acknowledge that the presence of individuals who challenge traditional gender norms is not a novel phenomenon and can be observed throughout the history of ancient civilizations. Contemporary discourse surrounding transgender and non-binary identities frequently suggests that these phenomena are of recent origin. Nevertheless, ancient civilizations across various regions possessed intricate knowledge and perceptions regarding gender and sexuality that surpassed the conventional male-female dichotomy. Through a comprehensive analysis of the perceptions and assimilation of transgender identities within diverse ancient cultures, a significant historical framework is established, contributing to the ongoing discourse surrounding gender diversity. Although the middle Ages did not encompass contemporary understandings of transgender identity, it is essential to recognize that diverse forms of gender expression and non-binary roles were evident during this historical era. This essay aims to provide insight into the perceptions, understanding, and occasional persecution or celebration of individuals who deviated from conventional gender norms within medieval societies. The contemporary chronicle of transgender individuals encompasses a narrative characterized by persistent challenges, dedicated activism, and gradual societal transformation. In contrast to earlier historical eras, such as ancient times and the medieval period, the contemporary era has witnessed the emergence of transgender individuals as a discernible social and political collective. This development has been facilitated by notable progress in medical science and psychology, as well as the ascent of LGBTQ+ movements.

Keywords: Transgender, LGBTQ, countries, law

Introduction

The presence of individuals who do not conform strictly to the traditional gender dichotomy of "male" or "female" is not recent, nor is it confined to any specific cultural or geographical context. Indeed, numerous Indigenous cultures have historically acknowledged the existence of diverse gender roles that transcend the binary construct, each carrying distinct cultural and spiritual significance. Understanding these roles comprehensively is crucial to contextualizing the contemporary discourse surrounding transgender and non-binary identities. Moreover, it challenges the prevailing Western-centric perspective that regards gender diversity as a recent or contemporary concept.

The concept of "Two-Spirit," prevalent in numerous Indigenous cultures, is a highly recognized example in North America. "Two-Spirit" is employed within Indigenous communities to encompass a diverse spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations that transcend the traditional male-female binary. Every indigenous tribe possesses distinct roles, traditions, and terminology. However, Two-Spirit individuals are commonly perceived as embodying masculine and feminine attributes. They hold distinctive social, spiritual,

and occasionally ceremonial positions within their communities (Lang, 1998) [14].

The Hijra community in South Asia, specifically in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, extends beyond conventional Western notions of transgender identity. Hijras encompass individuals who may exhibit intersex traits, have undergone castration, or do not conform strictly to binary male or female gender identities. In India, individuals who identify as a "third gender" have gained legal and social recognition. They frequently assume significant roles in diverse social and religious ceremonies (Nanda, 1990) [16].

Indonesia is home to a distinct community known as "Waria," a portmanteau derived from the Indonesian words for "woman" (wanita) and "man" (pria). The individuals in question possess distinct cultural characteristics and should not be conflated with transgender women despite the presence of certain shared traits. Waria frequently assume a distinctive position within Indonesian society and culture but also encounter discrimination (Boellstorff, 2004) [3].

In the cultural context of Samoa, the Fa'afafine are individuals who self-identify with a gender identity that transcends the conventional binary roles of male and female. The Fa'afafine

community is recognized as a distinct gender identity, and they fulfill significant roles in communal obligations and responsibilities. The term can be interpreted as "in the manner characteristic of a woman" and has been deeply ingrained in Samoan culture for generations (Schmidt, 2003) ^[17].

Regrettably, the emergence of colonialism profoundly impacted the recognition and societal positions of gender-diverse individuals within numerous Indigenous cultures. In the context of North America and other colonized territories, Christian missionaries frequently categorized individuals who identified as Two-Spirit as "sodomites." They actively pursued their eradication through methods of coerced cultural assimilation (Jacobs *et al.*, 1997) ^[13]. The enduring impact of historical trauma has resulted in the marginalization and erasure of Indigenous perspectives on gender diversity.

Indigenous communities are currently engaged in a persistent endeavor to revive and reclaim traditional conceptions of gender diversity. Dedicated individuals from activist and scholarly circles are actively engaged in imparting knowledge to Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations regarding the profound historical significance and value of non-binary gender roles.

Indigenous cultures worldwide provide valuable insights into the intricate histories and societal roles of individuals who could be classified as transgender or non-binary in contemporary terms. The presence of these cultural roles not only enhances our comprehensive comprehension of gender on a global scale but also poses a challenge to the ethnocentric perspective that binary gender roles are universally inherent or "natural." Preservation and respect for these conventional interpretations are of utmost importance, serving the dual purpose of safeguarding the Indigenous communities and fostering a comprehensive comprehension of human diversity that is inclusive and nuanced.

In the context of ancient Greece, the eunuch figure frequently surpassed conventional gender categorizations. The term "eunuch" does not exclusively refer to individuals who have undergone castration; rather, it can encompass individuals who assume societal roles traditionally associated with women. Furthermore, Greek mythology recounts the narrative of Tiresias, an individual who underwent a metamorphosis, transitioning from a male to a female and reverting to a male state. Tiresias emerged as a prophetic figure, exemplifying the profound incorporation of gender fluidity within the spiritual convictions of ancient Greece (Foucault, 1984) ^[10].

The Roman Empire exhibited intricate perspectives regarding gender. An illustrative instance pertains to the Galli, a group of religious practitioners devoted to worshipping the goddess Cybele. These individuals frequently engaged in the ritualistic practice of castration, alongside embracing feminine attire and assuming roles traditionally associated with women. The deities were extensively incorporated into the spiritual rituals of ancient Rome, and their androgynous characteristics were simultaneously revered and criticized, reflecting a complex understanding of gender (Beard, 1990) ^[1].

India has a rich historical tradition of acknowledging the existence of more than two genders. The Hijra community, which has a longstanding history spanning several centuries, comprises individuals who identify as intersex, eunuchs, and transgender. These entities possess distinct functions within diverse religious and social rituals. Furthermore, within Hindu mythology, a deity known as Ardhanarishvara exists, which embodies both masculine and feminine aspects. This representation serves as a symbolic manifestation of the

interconnectedness and interdependence between males and females (Doniger, 2010) ^[9].

In the historical context of ancient Mesopotamia, specifically within the cultural framework of Sumer, documented allusions existed to individuals who deviated from the established gender norms associated with men and women. Numerous divine entities, such as Inanna, were associated with religious followings encompassing priests exhibiting gender variance. These priests, known as the 'kurgan' and the 'assinnu,' engaged in rituals that challenged conventional gender norms (Black *et al.*, 1998) ^[2].

Hatshepsut, an ancient Egyptian Pharaoh, is a noteworthy illustration of gender fluidity within the historical context. In her capacity as a ruler, she assumed masculine titles and even donned a prosthetic beard. Hatshepsut's reign, while not explicitly associated with transgender identity, presents a compelling case for examining gender roles within historical contexts. This historical episode prompts discussions on the malleability of gender presentation and its implications for societal norms (Tyldesley, 1996) ^[15].

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, numerous Native American tribes acknowledged the presence of diverse gender identities and recognized the existence of individuals embodying Two-Spirit identities. These individuals frequently assumed distinct responsibilities and occupied unique positions of significance within their respective communities. While not classified as 'ancient' in the same manner as Greco-Roman or Mesopotamian cultures, these civilizations possessed enduring customs that acknowledged the concept of gender fluidity (Williams, 1986) ^[32].

The comprehension of the involvement of transgender individuals in ancient civilizations is a complex matter due to the biases exhibited by previous scholars, who frequently misinterpreted or intentionally disregarded indications of gender diversity. The interpretation of intricate gender roles in ancient cultures was distorted by a colonial and heteronormative perspective (Butler, 1990) ^[6].

The dissemination of Christianity exerted a significant influence on the formation of gender constructs within the context of medieval Europe. Church doctrines have traditionally exhibited a significant degree of inflexibility when addressing matters pertaining to sexuality and gender, frequently adhering to a binary framework that assigns specific roles in accordance with biblical teachings. Individuals who deviated from these societal norms encountered different levels of social exclusion, and in some cases, even accusations of heresy or witchcraft (Boswell, 1980) ^[5].

Monastic life presented certain prospects for the exploration and adoption of unconventional gender roles. Both male and female religious orders frequently mandated vows of chastity. In certain instances, the adherence to asexual or androgynous appearances was lauded as a means of attaining a state of divine purity. The historical accounts of notable religious figures such as Hildegard of Bingen and Joan of Arc, while not explicitly identifying as transgender, provide evidence of a degree of flexibility in gender roles within religious settings during the medieval period (McNamara & Halborg, 1992) ^[20]. Medieval scholars such as Avicenna and Thomas Aquinas engaged in scholarly inquiries pertaining to phenomena that can be understood today as intersex and transgender. The works of the scholars, drawing upon Aristotelian biology and Islamic medical texts, recognized the presence of individuals who exhibited 'mujun,' a term denoting gender ambiguity (Makdisi, 1989) ^[19].

The Chevalier d'Éon, despite belonging to a period slightly subsequent to the Middle Ages, offers a compelling illustration of gender diversity within a historical framework. Charles-Geneviève-Louis-Auguste-André-Timothee d'Éon de Beaumont, a prominent figure in the 18th century, served as a diplomat and intelligence operative for the esteemed French court. Notably, d'Éon experienced a significant transition in their gender identity, living as a man during the earlier portion of their life and subsequently adopting a female identity in the latter years. The public fascination surrounding d'Éon's gender identity garnered attention throughout Europe, indicating that the concept of gender fluidity was a topic of both intrigue and debate, even during historical periods commonly perceived as less accepting (Kates, 1995) [18].

Evidence from court records in multiple European jurisdictions suggests the existence of individuals who identified and lived as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth. These individuals were known to be involved in legal proceedings. In certain instances, individuals were subjected to legal proceedings for the purpose of concealing information from their partners or communities. However, it is worth noting that punitive measures were not consistently imposed. On occasion, societal acceptance of their self-identified gender was contingent upon providing evidence of sincere and genuine adherence to their chosen gender identity (Dekker & van de Pol, 1989) [8].

During the Medieval and Renaissance periods, the theatrical tradition commonly necessitated male actors to assume female roles due to the prohibition of women's participation in stage performances. The theatrical practice played a significant role in fostering a sophisticated comprehension of gender presentation among the general public, despite the fact that the actors involved did not identify as transgender in the contemporary context (Howard, 1998) [12].

In the medieval Islamic society, there existed a distinct group of individuals known as 'mukhannathun'. These individuals were characterized by their non-binary gender identity, which did not conform strictly to the male or female categories. Moreover, they frequently undertook specific social roles that were unique to their status. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these historical figures cannot be directly equated with contemporary transgender individuals. Their experiences varied significantly depending on the cultural milieu, resulting in a complex interplay of acceptance and marginalization (Rowson, 1991) [21].

The middle Ages did not solely represent a period characterized by obscurity and discrimination towards transgender individuals, nor did it exclusively serve as a refuge of tolerance and acceptance for them. The societal, religious, and legal contexts exhibited intricate and diverse characteristics, frequently presenting ambivalent perspectives towards individuals who deviated from conventional gender norms. Gaining an understanding of the historical context enhances our contemporary discourse on transgender matters by emphasizing the intricate and varied nature of human gender experiences throughout different periods and societies. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a notable trend towards medicalizing behaviors associated with gender variance. Individuals who would presently be classified as transgender were frequently stigmatized as having mental illness or deviant behavior. The renowned German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld began groundbreaking research about transgender matters during the early 1900s and notably introduced the term 'Transsexualism' (Stryker, 2008) [23].

The significant contribution of American endocrinologist Harry Benjamin in establishing the credibility of transgender medical care is evident in his seminal work published in 1966, titled "The Transsexual Phenomenon." Benjamin's advocacy encompassed the implementation of empathetic medical interventions, such as hormone therapy and surgical procedures, thereby establishing the foundational principles for the inception of the initial gender clinics (Meyerowitz, 2002) [22].

The LGBTQ+ activism, particularly about transgender rights, was significantly propelled by the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969. Prominent activists such as Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, who identify as transgender women of color, emerged as influential figures in the LGBTQ+ movement. Their activism not only confronted cisnormativity but also addressed the issues of racism and misogyny prevalent within LGBTQ+ communities (Feinberg, 1996) [11].

In recent decades, there have been noteworthy legal developments that have had a substantial impact on society. These milestones encompass a range of areas, including enacting anti-discrimination legislation and expanding healthcare accessibility. Landmark court decisions such as the *Bostock v. Clayton County* case in 2020 have established significant legal principles about transgender rights, specifically about safeguarding individuals against workplace discrimination (*Bostock v. Clayton County*, 2020) [4].

The media plays a significant role in influencing public perception. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the portrayal of transgender individuals in various forms of visual media, including films, television series, and documentaries. Television series such as "Pose" and "Transparent," as well as notable individuals like Laverne Cox and Elliot Page, have significantly expanded the discourse surrounding transgender experiences. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the media frequently bears responsibility for perpetuating stereotypes and promoting harmful tropes (Serano, 2007) [29].

The provision of healthcare services for individuals identifying as transgender continues to be a significant concern. Despite the significant progress in hormone replacement therapy and surgical interventions, transgender individuals frequently encounter various obstacles, including social stigmatization, limited access to healthcare professionals with expertise in transgender healthcare, and financial burdens. Implementing guidelines by organizations like the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) has significantly promoted consistency in healthcare practices. However, it is essential to note that these guidelines have not been universally embraced across all healthcare settings (Coleman *et al.*, 2012) [25].

Despite progressive gender identity laws in countries such as Argentina and Canada, a significant portion of the global community continues to exhibit a dearth of fundamental legal safeguards for transgender individuals. Proposals for legislation that targets explicitly transgender youth about their participation in sports or access to healthcare have been introduced even in jurisdictions that are considered progressive. This phenomenon highlights a notable disparity between the level of acceptance observed in legal frameworks and social attitudes (Movement *et al.*, 2021).

Despite the increasing awareness, transgender individuals continue to encounter substantial prejudice. Microaggressions, such as misgendering individuals or making assumptions about them based on their appearance,

are frequently observed in various social contexts. Although seemingly insignificant, these behaviors contribute to a hostile environment that can potentially negatively affect individuals' mental health and overall well-being (Nadal *et al.*, 2012) [28].

The concept of intersectionality, initially introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, assumes significant importance in the discourse surrounding the transgender experience. Transgender individuals who simultaneously identify with other marginalized groups, such as racial or ethnic minorities and disabled individuals, encounter a complex form of discrimination that necessitates a nuanced approach (Crenshaw, 1989) [7].

Social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram have emerged as valuable platforms for transgender individuals to engage in storytelling and foster communal connections. Nevertheless, online platforms have become fertile environments for the proliferation of hate speech, harassment, and misinformation, thereby exacerbating the multifaceted challenges faced by transgender individuals in contemporary society (Warner & Shields, 2013) [30].

Educational institutions are increasingly becoming arenas where issues about transgender rights are being fiercely contested. Despite the implementation of inclusive curricula and policies in certain educational institutions, a significant number of transgender youths continue to encounter instances of bullying, exclusion, and a lack of comprehension from both their peers and educators (Greytak *et al.*, 2013) [26].

Transgender issues exhibit significant diversity and vary considerably based on cultural and geographical considerations. Certain nations have acknowledged and embraced transgender individuals within their cultural customs, while others have chosen to enact laws that criminalize their existence. This stark contrast highlights the significant disparities that exist on an international scale (Winter *et al.*, 2016) [31].

Stark disparities within the transgender community characterize the contemporary era. Although there have been notable advancements in visibility, healthcare, and legal rights, it is essential to acknowledge that a considerable amount of work still needs to be done. The multifaceted nature of social attitudes, intersectional discrimination, and media representation introduces additional challenges to pursuing acceptance and realizing rights. Achieving a future where all transgender individuals can lead lives that are true to their identity and free from harm necessitates collaborative endeavors from various segments of society. The 21st century has witnessed notable advancements in transgender healthcare, encompassing a range of medical interventions such as hormone blockers for adolescents and progressively safer surgical procedures. Nevertheless, these developments have given rise to ethical discussions regarding the appropriate timing of medical transition and the potential ramifications on individuals' health (Wylie *et al.*, 2016) [24].

Several countries, including Argentina, Ireland, and Malta, have successfully enacted progressive gender recognition laws that embrace the concept of self-identification. This represents a significant departure from the historical stigmatization and medicalization of gender identity. The contemporary landscape of media, politics, and sports has witnessed discernible social transformations, as exemplified by the growing prominence of transgender individuals.

Despite some advancements, transgender individuals, especially those belonging to racial and ethnic minority groups, continue to encounter higher levels of violence, discrimination, and limited availability of healthcare services.

The notion of intersectionality, initially introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, has played a crucial role in comprehending the multifaceted manifestations of inequality (Crenshaw, 1989) [7].

Pursuing legal recognition and protection for transgender individuals has been multifaceted and arduous, characterized by obstacles and setbacks yet punctuated by notable achievements. In recent decades, there has been a notable shift in the legal domain, wherein courts, legislatures, and public sentiment have progressively recognized the inherent rights of individuals who identify as transgender. This essay provides an overview of significant legal milestones that have contributed to the progress of transgender rights.

Despite not being formally sanctioned events, the 1966 Compton Cafeteria riot in San Francisco and the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City played a pivotal role in shaping subsequent activism and legal proceedings. Transgender individuals, along with other members of the LGBTQ+ community, engaged in acts of resistance against police harassment, thereby initiating a civil rights movement that subsequently resulted in noteworthy legal reforms (Stryker, 2008) [23].

The initial noteworthy legislative achievement emerged in anti-discrimination laws encompassing provisions safeguarding transgender individuals. Minnesota became the inaugural state in the United States to enact legislation of this nature in the year 1993. Subsequently, numerous states and local governments have enacted comparable safeguards (Currah & Minter, 2000).

The Gender Recognition Act was enacted in 2004 by the United Kingdom, granting individuals the legal right to undergo a gender transition. Subsequently, several nations, including Argentina, Malta, and Ireland, have adopted more progressive measures that diverge from the practice of medical gatekeeping and instead permit self-identification (Whittle, 2015).

Medical care, frequently deemed indispensable for transgender individuals, has garnered significant scrutiny through a series of court decisions and legislative measures. In 2014, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services decided to revoke the ban on Medicare coverage for gender-affirming surgeries, thereby recognizing the medical necessity of these procedures (Reisner *et al.*, 2016).

The *Bostock v. Clayton County* case, a significant decision rendered by the United States Supreme Court in 2020, established that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 safeguards employees against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The *Bostock v. Clayton County* case in 2020 marked a significant achievement by extending federal workplace protections to transgender individuals, representing a historic milestone in this regard.

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 serves as a legal framework that prohibits discrimination based on sex within educational programs that receive federal funding. Although the original intention did not encompass safeguarding transgender students, numerous courts and guidelines have subsequently expanded these protections to encompass gender identity. This expansion was particularly notable during the Obama administration, as evidenced by the Department of Education's actions in 2016.

Including transgender individuals in military service has been a subject of intense debate and disagreement. In 2016, the United States Department of Defense enacted a policy revision that removed the prohibition on transgender individuals serving openly within the military. The decision

above underwent a reversal during the tenure of the Trump administration, only to be reinstated during the presidency of Biden in 2021 (Goldberg, 2021).

Although there is still much work to be done, there has been some notable progress in addressing the treatment of transgender individuals within the criminal justice system. There has been a gradual shift in prison policies towards acknowledging the distinct vulnerabilities faced by transgender inmates, encompassing concerns about housing arrangements and access to medical services (Jeness *et al.*, 2007).

The legal discourse has commenced in acknowledging the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by transgender individuals, with a particular emphasis on those who belong to racial and ethnic minority groups. The Violence against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 marked a significant milestone in federal legislation by explicitly prohibiting discrimination against transgender individuals in federally funded programs (Crenshaw, 1989) [7].

Ancient civilizations often had complex understandings of gender that defy the simplistic male-female binary of modern Western thought. By studying these societies, we can appreciate the richness and diversity of human experience across time and space. Far from being a modern phenomenon, gender diversity is as old as civilization itself.

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