

# Gender Diversity in India

## 1. Executive Summary

The exploration of gender is a natural and imminent part of a child's development. They begin this exploration early and the majority of the population in India does not struggle with their gender identity. Like most children, they progress through a series of stages and settle in a stage of constancy where their gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth. However, this is not as convenient for an estimated 1% of the population who identifies as transgender (children who have a gender identity that does not align with their sex at birth). Studies demonstrate that, just as a cisgender child settles into a state of gender constancy at an early age, so does a transgender child. They begin relating more to the sets of norms of the children who are born with their expressed gender. At an early age, trans children know that they are trans. However, heightened levels of discrimination and reduced levels of acceptance lead to an increased prevalence of internalized pathology, among various other barriers to learning.

The fun, furry, flexible and inclusive nature of Sesame Workshop is well positioned to start conversations surrounding gender equality. Its initiatives around the world have set the precedent for empowering the alternative to become the normative.

Research in child development supports the idea that gender develops at a young age and research in gender identity development supports the idea that transgender children develop gender similarly to their cisgender peers. Further the inclusive, empathetic, and diverse mission of Sesame Workshop positions them to start a conversation about diversity in gender identity. We recommend that Sesame Workshop India conducts a needs assessment, implements a multimedia initiative, and assesses the impact of that initiative to ensure transgender children in India are better understood and accepted and are provided equitable access to transformative learning opportunities.

## 2. Introduction to gender in childhood

At a very early age, children are interacting with and exploring the construct of gender identity and expression. The understanding of gender differences is developing by age 3 and identification with one's own gender is developing between age 3 and 4. Children progress through a series of stages in their gender development related to their understanding of their own gender and the gender of others. First, children start to understand their own gender and the gender of others. Second, they begin learning that gender remains stable over time. Third, children learn that gender is a fixed characteristic that is not altered by superficial transformations in appearance or activities – this is known as gender constancy. For example, a boy who understands that he is still a boy when he puts on a wig and a dress has developed gender constancy. Constancy develops between the age of 3 and 5-years old. At the age of 5, children are statistically most rigid in their definition of constancy. When their gender constancy is at this level, their knowledge and interest in gender based norms also reaches ceiling. Further, as children further develop and understand that gender is constant, they demonstrate a decrease in their gender rule based rigidity. The older a child gets, the stronger their understanding of gender constancy and the less likely they are to abide by gender rule based rigidity. This willingness to break the rules of gender is much more prevalent in girls than in boys as boys are more afraid of gender norm violations<sup>1</sup>.

When children discuss their understanding of gender, they apply the most rigid definitions when they discuss their future. When 11-year-old children talk about their lives in the present, the responses of boys

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<sup>1</sup> Rubble (2007). The role of gender constancy in early gender development

and girls are more similar than they are disparate. However, when they begin discussing their future lives, they are more likely to abide by rigid gender rule based rigidity. They use rigidity in gender as a way to demonstrate their own understanding of adult life as opposed to describing their lives with rigidity<sup>2</sup>.

### 3. Transgender and gender nonconforming youth

A person who is transgender (trans) or 'gender nonconforming' is a person whose gender identity (the set of gender based cultural norms that they most associate themselves with) does not match their sex (their classification dictated by their assigned sex at birth). As the prevalence of trans characters in popular culture continues to increase, so does the number of people who are comfortable expressing their nonconforming gender identity. In response, the body of research dedicated to understanding the experiences of trans/gender nonconforming people is growing. In 2016, Kennedy<sup>3</sup> reported that gender nonconforming youth are at a high risk for depression, suicide, drug use and HIV infection. Each of these risks will act as a barrier to education for the child. This study further looked at the prevalence of gender nonconforming children. 2.5%-5% of parents reported that their children were gender nonconforming and 2% of parents reported that their children identified with a gender contrary to the one they were assigned at birth.

In a move to better understand the thought process of transgender children, Olson<sup>4</sup> (2015) studied the responses of gender nonconforming children to questions about identity and gender and compared their responses to the responses of cisgender (a person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth) children. In a comparison of questions about gender identity trans children's responses to questions about preference and identity were compared to natal same sex peers, their answers were significantly different. On the contrary, when trans children's responses to these same questions were compared to cisgender children with the same expressed gender there was no significant difference. This suggests transgender children were not simply confused in their identity. Trans girls with a mean age of 9 (born a male and identify as female) understand gender constancy and answer questions about their gender identity in the same way that cisgender girls would. To study the environment's impact on a child's gender identity, the same study compared transgender children to their cisgender siblings and saw the same results. Further, trans children preferred peers of their expressed gender and objects endorsed by peers of their expressed gender.

A lack of acceptance of children as they express an identity that does not align with their natal sex often leads to heightened levels of depression, anxiety, and similar internalizing psychopathology. However, in a study of transgender children of the average age of 7.7 years old, Olson<sup>5</sup> explains the potential influence of familial acceptance and support as a child socially transitions (being raised and are presenting to others as their gender identity rather than their sex. This process is reversible, nonmedical, and usually includes changing the pronouns used to describe a child as well as their name and often their hair and clothing.) When a transgender child is supported in the presentation of their gender identity, the prevalence of internalizing psychopathology is significantly less than transgender children who are not supported. Further, transgender children who have been supported and have socially transitioned demonstrate developmentally normative levels of anxiety and depression when compared to cisgender children.

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<sup>2</sup> Elliot (2010). Imagining a gendered future: Children's essays from the National Development Study in 1969

<sup>3</sup> Kennedy (2016). Research priorities for gender nonconforming/transgender youth: gender identity development and biopsychosocial outcomes

<sup>4</sup> Olson (2015). Gender cognition in transgender children

<sup>5</sup> Olson (2016). Mental health of transgender children who are supported in their identities.

#### 4. Transgender circumstances in India

The first official count of transgender (third gender) people in India came from Census 2011. The total third gender population is reported at 487,803 with parents of 54,854 children in the 0-6 years population reporting that their child is a third gender<sup>6</sup>. 66% of this population resides in rural India, similar to the overall population – 69% of all Indians reside in rural India. The literacy rates for the community though clearly shows a need for support with only 56% of the community literate as compared to 74% of the overall population in the country being literate. Though another Govt. report states the total number of third gender people in rural India at 75,008<sup>7</sup>, third gender activists estimate that the number of third gender people in India would be 6 to 7 times that reported by Census 2011 (est 2.9 million – 3.4 million) and were happy to see such a large number of people identifying themselves as belonging to the third gender, despite the fact that the census counting happened well before the Supreme Court order gave legal recognition to the third gender in April 2014<sup>8</sup>. This estimate is very much possible considering that the estimated number of third gender in the United States has increased from 700,000 (estimated in 2011) to 1.4 million in 2016<sup>9</sup>. With more exposure and inclusiveness, it is expected that more members of the community would come forward by Census 2021 giving a more accurate number on the size of the community.

Currently, there are many possible reasons for more people not coming out to identify themselves as a third gender resulting in discrepancy of data. This includes them facing stigma, harassment, and violence due to their gender identity. For children, this discrimination also leads to them dropping out from schools which has evidently resulted in low literacy rates<sup>10</sup>.

A survey conducted by BuzzFeed<sup>11</sup> with 610 respondents in India on attitude towards transgender people showed broad support among respondents for non-discrimination protections, welfare benefits, and reservations for transgender people. On the contrary, 35% of the respondents expressed less comfort with transgender people than with those who identify as gay/lesbian when asked how they felt about both groups as neighbours. Only 20% of the respondents said that they know a transgender person and though this survey might not be representative, estimating with a more conservative 5% of the 18 -99 year population would indicate 38 million people know a third gender person out of which 13 million are likely to discriminate against or be uncomfortable with them.

The Government has taken significant steps to establishing third-gender identity allowing access to employment opportunities and social benefits for the community and it has had evident positive effects. A vast majority of the community still prefer to not change their ID partly out of deference to their families and society, but also because of the realities that underlie the veneer of acceptance and integration. It does not help that third-gender IDs do not address basic rights like marriage, transferring property or adopting children, which are governed by statutes based strictly on a man-woman binary.

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<sup>6</sup> [http://censusindia.gov.in/Ad\\_Campaign/press/third%20gender.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/Ad_Campaign/press/third%20gender.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Socio Economic and Caste Census 2011

<http://secc.gov.in/statewiseGenderProfileReport?reportType=Gender%20Profile>

<sup>8</sup> <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/First-count-of-third-gender-in-census-4-9-lakh/articleshow/35741613.cms>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/01/health/third-gender-population.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.glaad.org/blog/indias-census-counts-transgender-population-first-time>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.buzzfeed.com/soniathomas/indians-overwhelmingly-support-protections-for-transgender-p?utm\\_term=.nwK5z8nm#.wgVA2zQQ6](https://www.buzzfeed.com/soniathomas/indians-overwhelmingly-support-protections-for-transgender-p?utm_term=.nwK5z8nm#.wgVA2zQQ6)

## 5. Case studies

### 5.1 *Kami & Takalani Sesame*

Sesame Workshop has set the precedent for utilizing media to shift the mindsets of people with regarding sensitive topics. In South Africa, the HIV/AIDS crisis continues to be one such complicated situation. In response to the devastating impact of the disease on that nation, Takalani Sesame created a well thought out initiative that would promote an expansion in knowledge, a shift in attitudes and an increase in skills related to prevention. With the introduction of a very relatable Muppet named Kami who is HIV positive, they were able to spark a conversation where none had been had before. Through radio and television, Kami focused on humanizing and destigmatizing individuals living with HIV/AIDS. In 2007, Bhana<sup>12</sup> interviewed children who had been exposed to Kami. With some reluctance, they started talking about HIV/AIDS.

Researcher: "Do you think we should talk about this stuff (HIV/AIDS)?"

Gugu: "No, cos I think it's not a good education to learn about it 'cos we're too young"

Researcher: "But you know about that?"

Thobeka: "Yes, 'cos I watch Takalani and Kammi has AIDS. Kammi's mom has AIDS and Kammi was born with AIDS. Ja. Yes I have been learning from Takalani every day."

The kids go on to explain that they are not talking about it at school because they will be embarrassed. Yet they like learning about it on Takalani Sesame.

The impact of Kami and the HIV/AIDS initiatives of Takalani Sesame are far reaching. In a follow up survey with families that watch Takalani Sesame, parents reported that they felt the materials were relevant to their lives and they were more prepared to discuss HIV and AIDS with their children. Further, exposure to the initiatives correlated with increased communication about HIV between children and caregivers (parents were more than 2x as likely to have conversations with their children). Children who were exposed to the materials demonstrated gains in basic knowledge about HIV and AIDS knowledge about blood safety, attitudes related to destigmatization and skills related to coping with illness. Unexpectedly, this initiative reached an older demographic than intended, demonstrating the importance in having this conversation across age<sup>13</sup>.

Kami and friends have crossed the border to Tanzania where more than half of men and women said that they would not buy food from a shopkeeper with AIDS. However, after exposure to a short series of Takalani Sesame, children with highest exposure to the content saw an increase of .36 standard deviations from the mean with relation to their HIV/AIDS knowledge and attitudes. The more Takalani Sesame the child watched the more they knew about HIV/AIDS and the more they were willing to break the stereotypical norms<sup>14</sup>.

### 5.2 *Julia and Sesame Street*

There is no research to back the success and acceptance of animation leading to a muppet being created but with the demand that was generated from viewers to include Julia in the Sesame Street Tv show resulting in a Julia muppet, we propose the third gender topic can also be introduced in a similar manner to the viewers with the aim to gauge the interest that the segments develop over time.

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<sup>12</sup> Bhana (2007). Childhood sexuality and rights in the context of HIV/AIDS

<sup>13</sup> Cole and Lee (2017). The sesame effect: The global impact of the longest street in the world.

<sup>14</sup> Cole and Lee (2017). The sesame effect: The global impact of the longest street in the world.

### 5.3 SheZow

The Canadian/Australian children's show SheZow features Guy and his exploration of his life after he finds a magic ring, and is transformed into the female superhero SheZow, almost like a gender-bending Green Lantern. SheZow isn't a masculine, sinewy X-Men, but instead is more like Wonder Woman, complete with pink skirt, thigh-high boots and a pink car for saving the world. This is the first time gender bending has really been explored in children's television.<sup>15</sup> While it did receive some controversy upon its release, the first season received high ratings. It was broadcast in 2012/2013 in Australia, Canada, and the UK, and is now streaming on Netflix<sup>16</sup>. While Guy is not transgender, the show's portrayal of the complexities of gender serve as a powerful example of the power of children's media to address complex topics. Further, the writer of the show explains that Guy does learn a lot about himself by becoming SheZow.

## 6. Recommendations

Sesame has always emphasized inclusiveness, empathy and embracing diversity as evident from various important and sensitive topics addressed such as race, individuality, child abuse, death and more recently AIDs and Autism. With a substantial portion of the third gender community growing up being discriminated and in many cases without support or education, it is imperative that we start the conversation now and encourage them and the society around them to work together towards a better world.

**6.1 Needs Assessment** Conduct a needs assessment with transgender and cisgender children and parents as well as psychologists that study gender nonconformity. This needs assessment will focus on understanding the current scenario of transgender children in India, identifying preferred support strategies, and learning how best to communicate a message of acceptance.

**6.2 Gender Initiative** Based on the findings, we suggest the development of a multimedia initiative focused on humanizing and destigmatizing transgender/gender nonconforming people. It is recommended that the initiative include a character (Muppet or human) in the animation series (primarily because animation will not be as resource intensive) with the character's story and messaging linked to increasing acceptance and knowledge of transgender/gender nonconforming people. Further, it is recommended that the initiative include resources and tools to empower parents to discuss gender without bias as children move through the stages of gender development. This initiative must take Jennifer Kotler Clarkes advice on exposure into careful consideration: "My one caveat about "exposure" was that when we are focusing on differences, we must be careful about dealing with negative feelings around those differences, especially with young preschool children. By introducing the notion that some might feel bad about those differences (rather than being curious) we run the risk of introducing something that was not on a child's radar."<sup>17</sup>

While this initiative will introduce a new phenomenon that directly impacts a small population, it simultaneously engages the entire population in a conversation about kindness towards and acceptance of people who are trans/gender nonconforming.

**6.3 Monitor and Evaluate** Develop and implement an assessment to understand the impact of the program and perception of children, caregivers, and members from transgender community.

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/shezow-hub-superhero\\_n\\_3352789](http://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/shezow-hub-superhero_n_3352789)

<sup>16</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SheZow>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.joanganzcooneycenter.org/2017/07/11/diversity-brought-to-you-by-the-letter-e-exposure-empathy/>