In the quaint valley of Swat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), the transgender community struggles to stay afloat. For Niaz Khan alias Nadia, the President of the Transgender Community of Swat and Transformation Facilitator (TF) at IRC, COVID-19 has brought great misery to the community. The past two months have exhausted the meagre donations for collective survival. With the outdoors suddenly hostile, even a grocery run is agonizingly reconsidered, so are hunger pangs. Rents are due and the pantry is empty, yet local food drives conveniently miss them out again.

Within the Dera, they share their tribulations and their triumphs, a true community within a community. They have always been reluctant to venture outside, where they are dispossessed, and lonely. As we come to terms with our new reality, do we dare to craft the world anew for all of us?

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With the four walls closing in, some of us may feel trapped while most worry about the unpaid rent. As food supplies dwindle and the psychology becomes scarce; some may fear to return to such relations and others to rely on remittances for collective survival. With the outdoors suddenly hostile, even a grocery run is agonizingly reconsidered, so are hunger pangs. Rents are due and the pantry is empty, yet local food drives conveniently miss them out again.

For Sapna, rock bottom meant being forced to beg; with the recession incoming, no one cares for her services now. Fawad alias Wafa is a performer; without an audience, even the pennies received as tips are no longer possible. Even the tripping is excluded, and extend a helping hand to those who could really use it. Amidst this crisis, let us not forget what else is unthinkable for a transgendered person to seek treatment at a hospital if they fall prey to COVID-19.

Moreover, discrimination in public service delivery. To address the communities’ isolation and alienation from others in society, IRC also reassured the transgender communities of chlorine disinfection drives in their respective localities and effective handwashing techniques, the stations offer some measure of protection from COVID-19.

With prevention the best – and perhaps only – course of action viable for the trans community, IRC in Pakistan decided to equip them with the prerequisite tools to effectively ward off COVID-19.

IRC has been working proactively to cater to this vulnerable segment through the provision and installation of handwashing stations in key locations and health facilities across the country. These stations are intended for vulnerable communities, 24 have been installed especially in areas where gender minorities are concentrated. With contamination a constant risk, these stations have proven to be particularly effective for transgender communities, perhaps COVID-19 could allow others to empathize with the community too, just a little bit better.

In the words of Namkeen, “It is only with COVID-19 that others have started viewing each other with suspicion; we just need to be human.”

World Asli Shah alias Namkeen, a transgender in Pakistan, is Assistant GESI (Gender Equality and Social Inclusion) at IRC and a member of the transgender community in Peshawar. Shah菲尔德/from birth. In her own words, “No one ever told me about what it means to be trans. None of the doors were always bolted shut.” COVID-19 may have diminished the barriers between me and others but it has not eliminated the social and economic barriers to my rights. COVID-19 is not about the discrimination in public service delivery and access to healthcare. It is about the economic inequality and the discrimination in public service delivery and access to healthcare.

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