

LOST IN TRANSLATION: THE TRANS COMMUNITY AND COVID-19



“We are deemed unfit for the male ward and hazardous for the female one; access to healthcare is just one of the rights denied to us right at birth. COVID-19 may have closed doors for you, but for us, those doors were always bolted shut.” - Niaz Khan alias Nadia

With the four walls closing in, some of us may feel trapped while most worry about the unpaid rent. As the food supplies dwindle and the paychecks become scant, some may be forced to ration each morsel, and others to rally donations for collective survival. With the outdoors suddenly hostile, even a grocery run is agonizingly reconsidered, over and over. Isolated from loved ones and loathed by strangers within a six-foot radius, no one can simply exist in public anymore. COVID-19 has plunged us all into a strange world.

Tragically, this is the only world known to the Transgender community in Pakistan.

They have never been part of the “us”. When the halls are decked, melodies play and people connect, they represent the entertainment at the glittering affairs, not valued participation. In traffic jams and at tea stalls, we enjoy their banter and relish their vibrance, yet we must always be sure to laugh at them, and never with them. As we crown ourselves the most philanthropic nation and empty our pockets come Ramazan, they never make the final cut for charity or zakat.

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 savings they had, with no income on the horizon. With most relying on daily earnings from dance performances at weddings and parties, the ban on gatherings has hit particularly hard. Due to restricted mobility and lockdown across the country, they cannot move to greener pastures as none exist, nor can they come out on the streets to beg.



Nadia is a skilled tailor; with cancelled social events, unreliable incomes, and a 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 forthcoming. For Sapna, rock bottom meant being forced to beg; with the lockdown, even that avenue has vanished: there is no one on the streets to implore.

Abandoned by her family and with nowhere else to go, Sapna has found a new home. Residing in the dwelling or Dera together, this group of seven transgenders represents one unit. “Our continuing survival in a conservative area such as Swat is solely the result of a strong sense of community and camaraderie amongst the transgender members,” claims Salma, another member. They have always been reluctant to venture outside, where they are subjected to harassment and ill-treatment, even while running errands.

Within the Dera, they share their tribulations and their triumphs, a true community within an unaccepting society. However, none of them have the money to pay rent, and neither do other members of their close-knit community. With the days passing in lockdown, the landlord’s threats and eviction notices are a recurrent feature – and so are hunger pangs.

Rents are due and the pantry is empty, yet local food drives conveniently miss them out again.



Moreover, discrimination in healthcare facilities read like familiar, harrowing tales for the trans community. With decreasing availability of hospital beds and jostling for limited resources across the board, the repercussions would be particularly pronounced for the transgender community. However, it may not even come to that: Nadia opines that is unthinkable for a transgendered person to seek treatment at a hospital if they fall prey to 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 hence been working proactively to cater to this vulnerable segment through the provision and installation of handwashing stations under the Leveraging Inclusive WASH for Empowerment (LIFE) project. Out of the total 40 stations intended for vulnerable communities, 24 have been installed especially in areas where gender minorities reside in KP, with 10 of the stations in Swat. Complete with a water tank, liquid soap, and IEC stickers demonstrating effective handwashing techniques, the stations offer some measure of protection from COVID-19.

IRC also reassured the transgender communities of chlorine disinfection drives in their respective localities and facilitated their communication with the municipal authorities, effectively circumventing any possibility of discrimination in public service delivery. To address the communities’ isolation and alienation from others in society, IRC staff also regularly share IRC’s informative videos, produced in collaboration with WATSAN cell KP, on Whatsapp with the communities. They are also particularly encouraged to tune into the radio to remain apprised of IRC’s messages on preventive measures. Furthermore, the self-help groups set up under the LIFE project have become another source of solace and representation for the transgender community in these uncertain times.



Wajid Ali Shah alias Namkeen, is Assistant GESI (Gender Equality and Social Inclusion) at IRC and a member of the transgender community in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Even as Namkeen carried out her duties diligently and delivered well under the ambit of IRC for LIFE, her community’s continuing plight gnawed at her heart.

In the words of Namkeen, “It is only with COVID-19 that others have started viewing each other with suspicion; transgenders have always been viewed with disgust and derision in public, for no fault of ours.” For her, the transgenders have the same issues as that of other daily wagers, but they are overlooked in mainstream ration drives and cash assistance programs.

Namkeen hence reached out to other organizations to partner with IRC in order to arrange rations. In the course of her work for LIFE, she was able to identify fifteen particularly vulnerable members of the transgender community in Peshawar and cater to their immediate needs. She also facilitated IRC in registering and referring many to the Government of Pakistan’s Ehsaas Emergency Cash Program by collecting copies of CNICs and sending the numbers to 8171.

Namkeen continues to seek collaborations and partnerships for IRC, redirecting the attention of organizations and charities to this neglected segment of society. Her empathy allows her to go above and beyond her job description at IRC to serve her community, because she knows their pain.

However, one does not have to be trans to feel this pain; we just need to be human.

In Swat, staff at Environmental Protection Society (EPS), a partner of IRC in the LIFE project, stepped up to do their bit as well. Having engaged with the community during their work for LIFE, they were well acquainted with their troubles. They initiated fundraising in the office with the aim of catering especially to the transgender community, in the wake of the pandemic, aware that COVID-19 had compounded their troubles. They were hence able to arrange food supplies for twelve Deras, including that of Nadia’s, with each Dera catering to a minimum of four members. Some IRC staff members also contributed to the relief fund with a prompt wire transfer. Yet, the first anyone else heard of the good deed was when Nadia mentioned it.

Perhaps COVID-19 could allow others to empathize with the community too, just a little bit better.

COVID-19 has helped translate and transpire for us just a fraction of the trans plight – the scorch of being confined, dispossessed, and lonely. As we come to terms with our new reality, do we dare to craft the world anew for all of us – with the new “us” including everyone?

Even as we continue to deliver at our jobs in humanitarian organizations, this is the time to go above and beyond our job description to truly nurture our humanitarian spirit. We must educate those who discriminate, actively include the excluded, and extend a helping hand to those who could really use it. Amidst this crisis, let us not forget what else is killing us. Healing is possible – all it takes is a little more heart and a bit more initiative.