

# STRUGGLING WITH SOCIETY AND FAMILY



Bechan Mohammad Khatun

I am Mohammad Khatun and I am 68 years old. I want to identify myself as a transgender woman. I hail from Shambhunath-1 in the Khoksar municipality of Saptari from Madhesh Province (south eastern Terai region of Nepal). Born into a Muslim society, I have been compelled to navigate a life of continuous struggle from my earliest days. Being a Muslim from the Madhesi community, I'm an ethnic minority in Nepal. My family and I have faced numerous challenges in ensuring our family's survival.

Due to my family's deeply rooted religious beliefs, I have faced considerable challenges throughout my 68 years as a transgender woman. Both my parents worked as daily wage laborers, leaving them with little time for their children. Consequently, I grew up devoid of the warmth and affection a parent's presence provides. My family's financial struggles were a constant reality, as daily wage earnings often fell short of meeting our basic needs. This led to many nights where hunger kept me company as I lay in bed, waiting for my parents to return. The sound of my grumbling stomach became a familiar companion, a testament to the hardship we endured while yearning for my parents' return at the doorstep.

I confronted the pervasive discrimination in society due to my gender. My family treated me like a son, but my true interests and inclinations resonated more with girls. This mismatch in expectations led to recurring instances of verbal abuse from both my family and society. As I was growing up, I

lacked a proper understanding of my trans identity, which only added to the weight of my burdens.

At age of 13, I found myself coerced into a marriage with a girl who was 12 years old. This was per our family's customary practices. However, it was only as I matured after getting married that I started to truly comprehend my own gender identity. After four years, my spouse and I hadn't been able to conceive a child, which led to suspicions within the community where I was residing. I was told, 'You're not man, you have no ability to produce a child.' Fingers of blame were pointed towards my wife as well.

When I was 16, we had our first child. Looking back at those initial stages of my marriage, I recall the internal questioning I grappled with regarding my gender identity.

As the years went by, and I became an older teenager, I underwent behavior changes that didn't align with my external self. I gathered the courage to confide in my mother, admitting that I didn't feel attracted to my wife, that I liked wearing makeup and female clothing, and that my body language was same as women. In response, she urged me to keep my gender identity a secret.

By the time I was in my twenties, the truth gradually unfolded, revealing my reality to both family and society. When my father discovered my truth, he reacted with physical aggression, subjecting me to numerous instances of violence.



My wife did not know about my gender identity. After she found out, she did not disclose my identity to her family or our village society. For Muslim women, divorce was seen as disobeying the husband, which meant disobeying God.

I ventured away from my village into Kathmandu. I spent seven weeks there. My wife was left at home. But within a year, my father fell ill and I had to return to the village that had cast me out. Back home, I found myself entangled in a marriage I couldn't dissolve. Though I had more children by then, I still loved my identity. I also had another partner in the same village, and wanted to keep this relationship.

Various factors kept me from ending my relationship with my wife. When I was paralyzed for two or three years, my wife took care of me. There was love between us. She became my support.

The outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic compounded my challenges as a trans woman because I was publicly known as transgender. I became jobless. My citizenship card had my name as a male,

and this created a challenge when seeking or receiving COVID relief from NGOs and the government. My identity made me vulnerable, subjecting me to further victimization during the pandemic.

My wife and I battled to make ends meet during the pandemic. What stung the most was the lack of support from both NGOs and local government agencies, and even our neighbors. Their lack of assistance and understanding stemmed from society's rigid definitions of gender. Their ignorance and absence of empathy made my already difficult financial circumstances worse, fostering sadness, hopelessness, and despair. Gradually, this led me down the path of depression.

Approaching the latter half of my life after enduring various kinds of discrimination, I struggle to navigate a world where legal protection is elusive. If I knew the law, I would have sought legal recourse for the discrimination against the people of my community. There was no agency to voice our concerns and bring complaints of violence.

Caste, gender and economic disparities have long been the hurdles in my life journey. If someone is committed to eradicating poverty from their life, barriers should not exist due to one's identity. The government should not differentiate which marginalized communities receive financial assistance. My plea to the government is to foster an inclusive environment where all members of society can thrive regardless of their backgrounds.

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